

# VALOR

*The* STORY *of a* DOG



HAL BORLAND

Mei 1859



E. TIJWALD



Jy Brewer.





VALOR

*The Story of a Dog*

*Books by Hal Borland*

VALOR, THE STORY OF A DOG  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN TIPI TALES  
HEAPS OF GOLD (*verse*)

# VALOR

*The Story of a Dog*

BY  
HAL BORLAND



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FOR  
H., D., AND N.  
NOT FORGETTING SCAMP



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CHAPTER I  
CAMP NUMBER SEVEN







## CHAPTER I

### CAMP NUMBER SEVEN

#### I

VOL saw them coming over the hill in the supply man's spring wagon. Even before he could see the features of the new herder, Vol's dog intuition warned him that the newcomer would not be like Herder Louie. Buck and Juno, who lay with young Vol in the scant shade of the windmill, got up as the spring wagon approached, barked a typical sheep-dog greeting and trotted, with wagging tails, toward the little red house on wheels where the wagon stopped and the two men got down. The supply man greeted them and Vol got up from his cool bed and started up the hillside to join them. But when he saw the newcomer first ignore Buck and Juno, then turn and curtly order them away, Vol sat down and waited.

The newcomer was Dutch John, a squat, broad-shouldered, dark-bearded man. He spoke with a strange, unpleasant, guttural voice. Even from where he sat, Vol's nose told him this man had an unpleasant scent, and when Dutch John had kicked open the door of the house and tossed his blanket roll inside he returned to the wagon and fulfilled Vol's intuition. He hauled out from under the wagon seat, of all things, a badger!

Vol's hair rose bristling all along his spine, and both Buck and Juno retreated, growling and stiff-legged. But the badger evidently was a pet. He wore a broad leather collar and he was on a long chain. Dutch John hauled him toward the house, fastened the chain to one of the wheels and went about moving the rest of his gear. Buck and Juno went down to where Vol still sat and the three of them waited. Assuredly, this herder was not like their Louie.

Until the supply man turned back over the hill and drove away toward the Big Camp, twenty miles north, the three dogs stayed there beside the windmill. Then, when the wagon was quite out of sight and the sun was nearing the horizon where the blue ridge of foothills lay like a dark cloud, the new herder came from the little house and opened the gates of the pens. Immediately the sheep came boiling out, their leaders heading them toward the long watering troughs fed by the windmill. The flock had not drunk since the night before, when the supply man had watered them and then penned them before hurrying off.

Dutch John shouted commands which the dogs did not understand, but from habit they trotted to the far side of the flock, ready to swing them back toward the pens when the watering was completed. But as the sheep satisfied themselves at the troughs they turned to the grass in the valley. They were hungry as well as thirsty. John shouted more vague orders. Buck and Juno barked excitedly. Vol trotted down the valley, turning repeat-

edly to watch for some signal such as Louie would have given. John only shouted. In five minutes there was hopeless confusion.

The herder called the dogs, anger in his voice. They went, reluctantly, Vol lagging well behind. When they were close to the newcomer, who continued to shout, he ran at Buck and tried to kick him. Buck leaped aside.

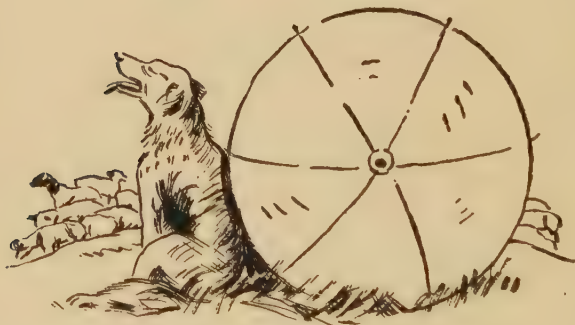
"You lazy defil!" John stormed, "Go bring back dem ewes. Go bring dem back!"

Buck waited for words he could understand. Dutch John turned on Juno, patient, gentle-souled Juno. "Go get 'em, you!" he shouted, waving his arms wildly. But Juno, too, understood no such words. She stood there, tail wagging uncertainly. Then Dutch John kicked her, and she could not leap aside. Vol's lip raised in sullen anger as he heard the clump and saw Juno bowled over. Vol remained well out of reach of that boot-toe.

All the while the sheep were scattering more and more. Now they were halfway up the far hillside. And the sun had set. Dutch John, his voice fairly squealing in anger, shook his fist at the dogs and ran after the flock. For the better part of an hour he ran, here, there, yonder, storming all the while but slowly working the scattered flock back toward the pens. Then the leaders went reluctantly inside, the others followed and by full darkness John had closed and fastened the gates. He was puffing like a dog that had chased a jack rabbit, but he still had breath enough to abuse the dogs all the

while he walked to the little house, and when he had gone inside and lighted the lamp the dogs could hear his angry voice as he banged about, starting a fire in the stove and cooking his supper. They waited, at a respectful distance, until long after John had quieted down, waited until he put out his light, in fact; but they received no supper for themselves. Once he came to the door and looked out, saw them waiting and shouted, "Lazy defils, you! T'ink I feed you, huh, w'en you don't work? Not John, he don't! *Nein!*" And he had turned away. But he did come out a little later with a plate full of food for the badger.

## 2



As HE lay in the cold darkness of the night, Vol was disturbed by his hunger. He had gone to the watering trough three times, but water couldn't fill the void between his ribs. Louie would never have let the dogs go



hungry. But then, Louie was not Dutch John. The picture of Louie as Vol had first seen him rose in the dog's memory. A little man, dark-skinned, with a pleasant, soft voice, had come across the yard at the Big Camp, talking with the Boss, Jim Bloom, who owned many sheep and had many summer camps scattered over the plains.

"I take Buck and Juno, and I take a pup, too," Louie was saying.

"How about one of Babe's pups, Louie?" the Boss had asked. "I mated her with Mack, that blooded collie. Good stock, they are."

But Louie had shaken his head. "I take a pup wit' brains, not blood." And then Louie had seen Bess, a collie herself, and beside her a long-legged, broad-jawed, tawny-colored pup born late the previous summer. Louie had stopped, looked at the youngster.

"You don't want him," the Boss had declared. "That one's got wolf blood. Remember that Jack hound of mine, the one with the coyote pack? Well, he's that pup's father. Jack's half wolfhound, half wolf. Mean, and not good for a thing but chasing coyotes. That pup's half collie, quarter wolfhound and the rest wolf. Look at his eyes. He'll never make a sheep dog."

But Louie had crouched down, was feeling the pup's broad shoulders, his tawny coat, examining his broad paws. And all the while the pup was licking Louie's hands. Vol still remembered the pleasant taste of those hands. A dog's tongue tells him much. Then Louie had

held the pup's muzzle in his two hands, looked at the breadth between the ears. With a final pat, Louie had stood up.

"I take him."

"That pup! That wolf-pup?"

"Si. He has brains. He is old enough he should have some sense and he should be ready to learn. He has—what you call it? *Valor*, we say in Spanish. He is worth much. He is brave, and maybe he is a fighter. I take him, Meester Bloom, and I call him Val, for *Valor*." But Louie pronounced it with the broad Spanish, "a" so it sounded more like Vol.

So Vol went with Louie, and with Buck and Juno, to Camp Number Seven that spring, and learned that life on the Colorado plains was sheep and sheep herding.

Other pictures returned to Vol's memory that cold, hungry night. Hot afternoons when Louie had sat on a high hillside beneath his big parasol, with Buck, Juno and Vol all lying in the welcome shade beside him and all watching the flock in the valley. Louie talked to the dogs as though they were his children, scratched the itchy places back of their ears, pulled a cactus thorn from Buck's foot or playfully rolled Juno about the grass. Then a dozen sheep would wander away from the main flock, stray up a side coulee where coyotes might be waiting. Louie would stand up. All three dogs would watch, eager. Louie would point. "Bring them, Buck," he would say softly, usually speaking in Spanish. "Bring them, Vol." And he would make a

little motion with his hands. Buck would be gone, Vol at his heels. Juno would return to the parasol's shade.

Down the hillside they would race, and when they would reach the valley floor Buck would look back. There on the hillside Louie would be standing, and when the dogs looked back he would signal again, perhaps with only his hand. Then on again, knowing perfectly what Louie wanted. They would turn the strays back, gently but firmly, head them toward the main herd. Then they would watch Louie again. Perhaps they had missed one which was further up the coulee. If so, Louie's motions sent them back. If not, a wave of the hand called them up the hillside.

It was all very easy, if one only used his eyes. Louie knew dogs and Louie knew sheep. And the dogs knew Louie. Many times they did not even wait for Louie's orders, for they, too, knew sheep. Juno especially would watch the flock as though she, not Louie, were in charge. Louie had said she was the best sheep dog in the country. Louie had trained her himself, as he was now training Vol.

Then, when the sun slanted well to the west, they would start back to the little house on wheels and the windmill and the pens. The dogs knew, without a word, what was to be done. They drew the flock together, urged the leaders homeward, kept the stragglers moving. And when the sheep had been watered, the dogs took their places on each side of the gates while Louie slowly sent the flock between them, usually with Vol

to help. Before one quite realized what had happened, all were safe inside and the day was done.

There was no hurry about it, no shouting, no anger, no real work. One went out with Louie in the morning, and one watched the sheep all day and one came back at night. Then Louie cooked supper and he gave the dogs their meal. Usually he sat on the steps of his little house and talked to them as they ate. Sometimes he got out his guitar, when the moon was large, and sat there in the evening and sang songs. Louie could even laugh when a doleful tune set Vol to howling, and he would turn to another melody which soothed the dog's nerves.

Another picture. Vol had found a rattlesnake, in his wandering, while Louie sat in the shade of his parasol. Vol had danced around the snake, dared it to strike, barked loudly. He had seen Louie coming down the hillside toward him. Made more bold by Louie's coming, Vol had leaped in, caught at the snake, nipped it, flung it high. But in so doing he had been bitten. Sharp fangs had shot fire into his foreleg. Louie had come up just as Vol finished the fight with fierce puppy anger. And Louie had seen that Vol was bitten.

Louie had seen the leg swelling. He had held the leg in a firm hand, slit the skin deftly, made the wound bleed. Then he had taken out a little bottle and poured purple crystals—permanganate of potash, had the dog only known—into the open wound. But as Louie had poured them in, Vol had leaped with the sting of the medicine, struck Louie's hand and spilled those crystals

which remained in the bottle. Louie had laughed, and soon Vol had felt much better.

Two days later they had been crossing a deep gully, four miles from camp. Louie was climbing a steep bank. He slipped, caught at a sagebrush. Vol, near by, heard a familiar buzz, saw something dart out from the sagebrush roots. Louie had cried out, fallen back and stood in the bottom of the gully holding his left arm with his right hand. Then he had drawn his knife, slit that left arm and watched the blood come. He had taken out a little bottle, just as he had done for Vol. But now he had merely looked at that bottle, and Vol had sensed something very wrong. Louie had dropped the bottle and tied his handkerchief tightly around his elbow. Vol knew there had been a rattlesnake in that sagebrush.

Louie had called the dogs. They must go home. They must take the sheep in. And they did go home, though Louie had to stop many times and rest while the dogs urged the reluctant flock across the flats. They took them in without an order from Louie, and while the sheep were drinking Louie went slowly up the hillside to his little house. The dogs penned the sheep, still without an order, and they waited for Louie to come and close the gates. But Louie did not come.

The sun set, and still Louie did not come. It grew dark, and there was no light in the little house. The moon rose, and the dogs remained on guard at the gates. All night they stayed there, and not even with new daylight did Louie appear. The flock grew rest-



less. It was time to feed. The dogs knew it, and they let the sheep file out. All day they watched the flock graze, Juno ever on guard and Buck and Vol near by. All day they kept within sight of the house, but still no sight of Louie.

Another night of guarding the gates, and another day of watching the flock graze. The dogs were getting worn. They were hungry. Vol caught a jack rabbit, and Buck demanded and got a share. Buck caught one, and Juno, too, had meat. That night the sheep refused to be penned, and the dogs were too tired to do the job unaided. By dawn the flock was scattering, and not even Juno could keep the sheep together.

Noon of the third day and a dust cloud in the north told of some one coming. Out of that cloud came the supply man, with Louie's rations of flour, salt pork, sugar and coffee. The dogs watched him drive up to the house. He went inside, stayed only a moment, came out in haste. Then he drove rapidly to where the scattered flock was feeding. He called the dogs, talked to them, helped them round up the sheep and hurry them into the pens. And he closed the gates. Their vigil was over.

The supply man hurried then to the house, with only a brief word of praise for the dogs. But before he went in again he lifted the tarpaulin in his wagon and hauled out a big slab of meat, which he cut into three pieces and gave to them. Then he went in, and soon he came out, with a blanket around a heavy bundle in his arms.

Vol knew that bundle was Louie. It had Louie's scent. But it had another scent, too, a scent that made Vol afraid. He went down by the windmill, and there he sat down and howled, just why he didn't know. But he was still howling when the supply man placed Louie in the back of the wagon and drove away northward. That night all three of the dogs howled, and the little house on wheels was both dark and empty.

## 3



LATE the first night Dutch John came to Camp Number Seven, when the half moon had dropped nearly to the horizon, the three dogs went, one at a time, to the waterhole up the valley. From there they wandered up the hillside away from camp, at first aimlessly then with a definite purpose. Half an hour later Buck's voice was raised in the cry of the chase. All three dogs sped over the flats, closing in steadily on the jack rabbit Buck

had flushed. Buck made the kill and after the usual snarling and noisy bickering, all three of them had a share. Then they were off again.

Three times they ate before the first faint flush of dawn showed in the eastern sky and they turned back toward camp. When Dutch John rose and looked out shortly before sunup all three dogs lay peacefully sleeping in their favorite beds down by the windmill.

John cooked breakfast, as the dogs knew by the odors which came from the little house. Then he came out with a stack of pancakes, tossed a handful to the badger and called the dogs. They went, warily, and John threw his offering toward them, turned without a word and went back into the house. A moment later Vol smelled a peculiarly rank scent, the same scent he had noticed about Dutch John when he arrived, but now a dozen times stronger. John had come out and sat in the doorway, a jar of rancid mutton tallow in his hand. This he smeared on a pair of high leather boots like those he had on his feet. The odor was so annoying that Vol turned away from the heap of pancakes, carried the one he was eating back to the windmill and finished it there. When John went to the pens a few minutes later Vol noted that he left the newly greased boots on the doorstep where the sun would strike them all morning.

The sheep were turned out, drank and began to feed. John and the dogs followed them, the dogs keeping their distance from this herder who had so abused their confidence last night. Most of the morning all went

well. The sheep were well behaved and required little attention. But early in the afternoon they began to scatter. Juno saw the first restless movement. She trotted toward the wanderers, watching expectantly for some signal from Dutch John. He made no move. When he did see what was happening, Juno was among the sheep. Immediately he called her, his voice angry. She went a little way toward him, still expecting some signal. Instead he called her again, this time shaking his fist. But Juno, instead of hurrying away from the sheep she wanted to gather, only waited where she was. Dutch John turned to Buck and Vol.

"Go get 'em!" he shouted. "Dat Shuno, she shust scatter dem. I fix her. Go get 'em, you!"

Buck started toward the sheep but Vol made no move.

"Go 'long dere!" John shouted at him. But Vol stayed where he was. He, like Juno, was waiting for some such signal as Louie would have given. And even Buck, after going halfway down the hill, stood and waited. John, now very angry, ran toward Vol.

Vol waited until the herder was close upon him before he leaped aside. John kicked at him, and Vol lifted his lip in a snarl, backing away. John tried it again; Vol openly growled a warning.

The sheep were scattering more and more. Angry as he was, John saw that. He cursed the rebellious pup and set out toward the flock. Both Buck and Juno saw him coming and, mistaking angry motions John made

with his arms for the signals Louie would have given, quickly brought most of the stragglers into the main herd.

The same thing happened on the way home that evening, Vol refusing to make a helpful move until he received orders he could understand and John becoming very angry. Again he tried to kick Vol, and again Vol snarled at him. And at the pens Buck did the wrong thing because John shouted an order no dog on earth could understand. John was on him in an instant, that brutal boot-toe in action. Buck whimpered in pain, but Vol, near by, snarled again.

As soon as the pens were closed John went to the house for a rope. Then, with mock friendship which only partly fooled Vol, he approached the dogs. Deftly he slipped a noose over Vol's head. With cruel laughter he hauled the pup toward the house and tied him to a stake he had driven in the ground. Then he undid the chain that tethered the badger and led the beast toward the spot where Vol fought at the rope.

"Ha!" John gloated. "Now we see some fun. Now we see if you show your teeth to Fritzie, yah? All right, Fritzie, giff him a kiss. You know dis kind of a dog, Fritz. Giff him a *kussela*!"

The badger waddled toward Vol, crowded him to the end of his tether and calmly slapped him with a paw armed with long, razor-sharp claws. Vol yelped in fright and pain and jerked frantically at the rope. Fritz followed as Vol leaped about and delivered his fierce



"kiss" again. A third time it happened, and then Vol's frenzy loosened the noose and he was free. He fled whimpering to the nearest waterhole to soothe his gashed muzzle in the muddy water. An hour later, when he crept back to his sleeping spot beside the wind-mill he heard Dutch John still laughing to himself and talking to his badger.

A discouraging week followed. Although the dogs began to understand John's orders and John in turn to realize that certain arm motions meant certain things to the dogs, Vol was still surly and John took every opportunity to plague him. He gave Vol scant meals, if any. He saw that Vol disliked the rancid mutton tallow so he melted some and fouled Vol's favorite sleeping place with it. And one evening he again caught Vol and tied a rope around his neck, this time tying it so tight the dog nearly choked.

When John went to bring the badger, however, Vol set his teeth in his tether. But before he could sever it Fritz was there slashing his tender muzzle once more. Vol jerked back, tried to escape, failed and was wounded again. He fought at the rope in a frenzy, and at last it parted where his teeth had weakened it. The noose remained tight around his throat, but he was free of the tether—and free of Fritz. Again he found comfort in the cool waterhole, and again he heard Dutch John's laughter.

For five days Vol suffered the agony of that choking noose which, try as he might, he could not remove.

Once more John caught him. This time Vol stood patiently, welcoming anything, even Fritz's claws, that might free him from that choking rope. John tried several times to slip another tether beneath the rope around the dog's neck, but it was no use. The rope collar was too tight even for that. John drew his knife. Holding Vol's head between his knees, and keeping another rope handy, he slipped the blade under the choking collar and cut it off.

As the rope gave way Vol caught a deep breath. In that breath he changed from a choking collie pup to a creature with all the strength and ferocity of long pent-up anger. The blood of his collie mother gave way to his father's wolf strain, and with a leap he was free of the herder's knees. Another leap and he was at the man's throat.

The move was so sudden that Dutch John dropped his knife. He could only lift an arm to ward off the pup's teeth. And those teeth sank into the herder's wrist, sank in, slashed wolf-like and let go. Vol leaped again for John's throat. This time the herder's heavy boot swung out and caught the dog squarely. He sprawled and rolled, but came up fighting. This time he leaped at that hateful, vile-smelling boot. He caught it and sank his sharp teeth deep. They pierced the heavy leather, found flesh beneath. John was now the one to yowl.

But Vol knew instinctively when to give up the fight. He paused only a moment for a last snarl, then fled.

A hundred yards he ran, a growl still rattling in his throat and the hair on his shoulders still stiff in anger. Then came a crack—a sound the dog knew and faintly respected—and with it came a fierce, stabbing pain high in one shoulder. The blow knocked him from his feet, but he was up and running again in an instant, though his left foreleg now hung limp. Other bullets from Dutch John's rifle followed, but only that first one touched him.

That night, Vol, the flesh wound in his shoulder licked clean, twice circled back toward the hillside where Dutch John's little house on wheels stood. Each time he wistfully listened to the barking of Buck and Juno, half tempted to go down and join them. But each time his nostrils caught two scents—that of rancid mutton tallow, and that of Fritz, the badger.

About the time the dwindling moon rode directly overhead Vol howled at it twice, yelped wolfishly down toward Buck and Juno and limped away. His scarred muzzle pointed toward the foothills on the western horizon. What lay there he did not know nor did he consciously care. Camp Number Seven no longer had any claim on him and every step he took put it further behind him.



CHAPTER II  
WILLOW CREEK







## CHAPTER II

### WILLOW CREEK

#### I

IT WAS early July when Vol deserted Camp Number Seven. For days on end he roamed the flats to the west, fifteen or twenty miles beyond Dutch John's range. By day he spent most of his time resting and sleeping in the tall grass that by then was beginning to wave blue-topped in the swales, and by night he wandered the hills in search of meat. Young cottontail rabbits were the easiest to catch, since Vol was still lamed in that left foreleg, but some nights the best he could do was field mice. It was a hard existence at best, but the shoulder was healing and Vol had no short-tempered herder forever nagging him and forcing him to face the claws of a surly badger. Vol thrived, grew in bone and sinew if not in flesh, and learned the first lessons of living on his own.

But constantly he ranged further west. And in early



August, when his shoulder was so healed that he ran with only a slight limp, he came one dusk to the edge of a steep-banked valley in the bottom of which glowed several pools where Willow Creek bubbled to the surface in its underground course toward the Purgatoire River. He was thirsty. He had just given up a hard chase after a Long-Eared One, a jack rabbit. So he found a path down the bluff and went to the nearest pool.

In this valley the grass grew rank, and Vol's nose told him that none but the wild creatures lived here. There was no man-smell nor even the smell of horses. The pool he now approached was sweet, clean, cool water, gleaming at this time of day with the bright, steely blue of a sky that would glow long after the shadows had settled deep over all the earth and especially deep in this steep-walled valley. Vol drank his fill, then waded on in until the coolness of the water soaked through the hair not only on his hips and belly but until it soothed those healing muscles of his shoulder. Then he turned back, climbed ashore and shook himself. But as he started up the valley little streams of water continued to run down his legs and keep the pads of his feet tingling.

He traveled far up the valley that night, past the long waterhole lined with red willows which gave the stream its name and even beyond. He flushed a young jack rabbit, caught it after a brisk run, ate and continued his exploration. Nowhere did he find the man-

smell he dreaded. And at last he came to a place where the valley broadened and the steep banks faded away. There he swung out onto the flats to the west, at the far edge of which rose a dark cloud of foothills, with a lighter cloud of mountains beyond. On these flats Vol turned back northward, ranging at random. He found a prairie-dog town, with many enticing odors. He found a broad, dark hole with the hated smell of Fritz, Dutch John's badger, only this smell was completely wild and not made even more dank and unpleasant by a mixture of man-smell. He also found that these flats were the home of Bounce-Tail, the cottontail rabbit, and Mephisto, the skunk, as well as Long Ears, the jack rabbit. And once he flushed a startled prairie chicken. Truly, these flats were well stocked with food.

Near dawn Vol turned back toward the east, and soon he was on that high bluff which flanked Willow Creek Valley on the west, looking down once more on the string of pools that now were reflecting the first flare of daylight as they had, only a few hours before, reflected the last light of day. Unconsciously he knew this was the place he had been looking for when he fled from Dutch John. Without more ado he threaded his way down the bluff, found a spot on the east-facing slope where the morning sun would warm him, and curled up in a nest in the tall grass.

There he slept or drowsed until almost midday, when he roused long enough to stretch, shake himself

leisurely and visit the nearest waterhole for a drink. Then he moved across the valley to a place where he would be warmed by the afternoon sun and yet could watch what went on beneath him in the valley. There he remained until mid-afternoon. Then he yawned, stretched himself, lay back and licked all four paws carefully. And at last he started up the valley. Half a mile and he paused, sniffing the air. High above him on the right was a ledge. He climbed up to look closer. He found a shelf in the soft earth, perhaps five feet wide and a dozen paces long. Behind it the bluff rose sharply another five or six feet. Almost directly below lay one of those long, narrow pools of cool water. In the cliff here on the ledge was a series of holes, such a series as cottontail rabbits often made in smaller hill-sides. But these holes were bigger. Half a dozen rabbits could enter these at once. And scattered along the ledge were little leavings of bone and fur, such as Vol left on the plains when he had made a meal of a rabbit. And there were feathers, such as Whirr-Wing, the quail, wore. Nowhere were the little round leavings of Bounce-Tail.

Vol sniffed at these holes. They were not the home of Mephisto, the skunk. Nor had Scar Face, the wild badger, used them. Long Face, the coyote, he decided had made these dens. But Long Face had not been here in many days. Vol's nose told him that as certainly as would a man's eyes if a printed notice had been hung there. He sniffed at the holes again, forced himself

part way into the biggest one, backed out and turned away. From where he stood he could see the sky nearly to the horizon there in the east. And behind him rose the sheer earth wall that would break the full force of northwest storms in the winter. He could see far up and down the valley, and from the edge of the ledge he could watch the whole stream course from the bend a mile above to the next bend more than a mile below.

But Vol was not yet ready to make himself a permanent home. He returned to the valley floor, picked up a scent and was off on his nightly hunt. Dawn found him again in the valley beneath the ledge and no matter how far afield he was led in his search for food, each day for a week brought him back to the same spot.

Then one afternoon when he mounted to the ledge, sniffed about to see who had been there since his last visit, he was satisfied with his findings and forced his way into the largest of the holes. It was a tight fit, his long legs and broad shoulders already making him somewhat bigger than the coyote who had last used it. But five feet in from the entrance Vol found himself in a little room big enough that he could turn around. Overhead a gopher hole led to the surface of the ground, and through it a straw of light came gleaming. This inner room was littered with dead grass, bones and sticks, and when Vol turned around a small Russian thistle caught in his tail. He went back to the open ledge.

The remainder of the afternoon his claws were busy

at a new job. Vol was ripping out the hole, making it big enough for his own freedom. He worked at it fitfully for several days, and often quit the job for other things. And even after he had widened the entrance and cleared out the inner room he deserted it several days to go foraging on the flats to the east. He was not yet ready to settle down in a fixed den.

But soon he adopted the den as formally as a half-wild dog could. He had been hunting in the valley, not exactly hungry but eager for a catch. He came to the pool there beneath the ledge, drank sparingly and started on. Suddenly then he stopped, nose quivering. His tail stiffened. The wind he was facing brought him an exciting scent. He sniffed it a moment then trotted cautiously ahead. Twenty paces, thirty, still nosing the wind.

It was the odor of Bounce-Tail, the cottontail rabbit. Vol was tense nerves from muzzle to tail-tip. He moved ahead, cautious as a cat. Step by step he went, pausing often. Then he halted, one foot in midair. His sensitive black nostrils told him the quarry was in the tuft of bunch grass ten feet ahead. He could not see the rabbit. He did not need to. He knew it was there.

Three more steps, noiseless as a shadow. Two more.

Vol's crafty feet scarcely moved. He eased ahead silently as the moon. The bunch grass was scarcely a length away. The rabbit was sleeping, head up-wind, away from the dog.

Vol's shoulders rippled as the muscles tautened. His haunches set like catapults.

Vol sprang.

There was a little frightened squeak. That was all. Vol stood with meat in his mouth. His leap had been perfect.

He returned to the pool with quick, proud steps. He dropped the rabbit and drank, then picked up his meal again and turned up the hillside toward the ledge there above him. And as the dawn crept into the eastern sky only a few short hours later, Vol lay outstretched on the ledge in front of the new burrow, his belly well filled and fresh bits of fur and bone littering his doorway.

## 2

A FEW evenings later Vol lay outstretched on his ledge, listening to the sounds of his new, free world. The sun had set and there were calls and soft cries and wailings all around, both in the valley below and on the flats above. It was the time when the people of this country began to venture forth with soft footfalls and wary eyes.

It was not yet time for Vol to make his nightly pilgrimage in search of food, so he lay here now licking his paws and listening. Suddenly a sound came that caused him to cock an ear. Back of him, on the flats to the west, some one was "yap-yapping." Vol listened. "Yap yap yap," came the voice, continuing with a series



of high-pitched "yip yip yips" which rose to a "woo-u-u-eee-ee-eee." Twice it was repeated, then from that sharp "woo-u-u-eee-ee-eee" the voice seemed to tumble in a long "uuu-oo-oo-oo-oo" which ended in a snarling, spitting series of yaps and yips for all the world like the sound of two cats in a barnyard fight.

Vol stirred restlessly. He had often heard the sounds before, at Camp Number Seven, and always before he had barked lustily, which usually silenced the noise-maker for a time. But now he did not bark. Somehow, the sound did not disturb him enough for that. Then it was repeated, this time from another direction. And Vol knew two coyotes were out there on the flats, doing their best to make the wild world believe they were not two but a full dozen. As they kept it up, Vol ignored them completely. They were not in his valley, and they showed no signs of coming there.

He heard, instead, the plaint of a little burrowing owl such as lives in prairie-dog towns. It was a harsh cry, quivery and long drawn-out. But between the owl's notes came the soft, plaintive cooing of doves that called back and forth across the valley.

"Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, whee whee whee!" came the notes of the owl. As those notes died away, the doves called, "Whoo-oo-oo-oo, who-who-whoo-oo-oo-oo!" quickly answered from the other side of the canyon then interrupted by the owl's cry once more.

High overhead in the gathering dusk the bull-bats circled. Their long wings would beat the air quickly as



they, too, cried in a high-pitched voice, then they would float motionless a way and repeat the wing-beating and the cry. They were circling wide, but soon one of them poised over the ledge where the dog lay. One of them cried out, drifted, cried again and suddenly dived earthward with a booming roar of the wind through his wings. Down, down he rocketed, straight toward the dog on the ledge. Until he was within ten feet of Vol's head he roared downward. Then his wings tilted, the roar died and the bird slipped off harmlessly into the valley, only to spiral upward again and join his companions high above.

Vol shook his head and rubbed his nose with one paw. He had risen half to his feet as that zooming dive carried the bull-bat toward him, and he had bared white teeth to meet the talons he half expected. Now he only half relaxed. From beyond the opposite hill the moon was rising like a giant, glowing coal of red. Vol yawned, stretched and went down the hillside into the deep shadows of the valley.

The moon was overhead, now sheep-white, when he returned. He was well fed and pleasantly tired. But he did not at once curl up and sleep. The same uneasiness that had urged him back here hours ahead of his usual time kept him wary. He lay and watched the shadows on the opposite bluff.

For half an hour nothing happened. Then the dog's head lifted expectantly. Almost at once a coyote yapped off to the east. How Vol sensed that the coyote was

there, none could say. But he did sense it, even before he heard a sound. Now he lay, head up, and listened. From down the valley a little, but still on the opposite side, came another coyote yelp. Another. And at last a fourth. There was a pause of quiet, then all four of them yelped from the same direction. Vol got up, walked about and returned to the warm spot where he had lain before.

The coyotes yelped again, nearer at hand now. This time the chorus was brief, almost defiant in tone. Then all was silent, and the moonlight lay so serene it was tense. Vol sat up.

A few minutes later he saw the first thin form appear against the sky on that opposite rim. Another appeared beside the first one. Together they came over the hill-top and into the valley. Another appeared, and it, too, came down the hillside. And at last the fourth shadow followed.

Four coyotes seldom travel in a group, he knew. Two frequently hunt together, but when more than two are abroad together it is usually on some mission of particular mischief where the courage of numbers is needed. Vol knew this, and he knew, too, that his uneasiness had been well founded. Trouble was brewing.

The four of them were soon lost in the shadows of the valley, but through the strong breeze flowing down the stream Vol caught an occasional scent of them. They were going to the waterhole, that he knew too. Very likely they would then come here to the ledge, which

had been a coyote den before Vol took it over. But before they came they would know he was here. They would get his scent at the waterhole.

When the first of the four appeared he was wary. The full moonlight set him out as a thin-flanked, long-jowled fellow with slit eyes that gleamed a greenish yellow. He rose out of the tall grass like a gray shadow and stood there, not twenty feet away. When another stood beside him, and the two of them advanced to the rim of the ledge, Vol growled a warning.

They paused. They knew this stranger they faced was no coyote. Vol was full twenty inches high at the shoulder, and his chest was half again as broad as the coyotes'. His jaws were both broader and heavier than the coyotes' jaws, and his lifted lip showed strong, white teeth even longer than theirs.

As they waited, the other two gray ones came up. Then all four advanced onto the ledge itself. Vol stood facing them at the entrance to the den. The two in the lead crouched, crept closer, snarled. Vol stood unmoved. Together they half-leaped toward him, stopped short. In that instant of pause Vol sprang forward, a dark bolt of fury. His shoulder caught the outer coyote full in the chest. His jaws clamped shut with a click and a crunch. They snapped and snapped again. There was an instant of snarls, yelps, yips of surprise and pain. Three tawny bodies rolled there in the moonlight. Then all was quiet, and Vol stood once more with his back to the den.

Only three coyotes now snarled at the end of the ledge. The fourth yelped in pain as he crept down the hillside. Vol's teeth had sunk home in that first foray.

But the three of them were not yet discouraged. One leaped toward Vol. The others followed. Vol met them coming. He closed with the leader on his own ground, and his teeth sought that spot beneath the jaws. The other two were on him as he went down, knocked over in the rush, but he shook them off. His teeth found fur, reached deeper, found flesh. They ripped and slashed, wolf-like. Then that throat was out of reach and Vol was down again. A gray paw came close. Vol caught it, sank his teeth deep. A yowl of pain and fright told what had happened. Vol's teeth lashed out again, and again, and still again, always finding gray fur and flesh beneath. The ledge seemed to clear a little. The coyotes were backing away. Vol followed up his advantage. He closed with the nearest one, and the force of his charge carried both over the edge and into the grass just below. Before he could set his teeth in anything he was alone. They were gone, yelping in pain and surprise.

Vol followed them a little way, but when he reached the waterhole he stopped. Their cries had been silenced, but he heard them running full tilt down the valley. Vol knew they had had enough. He knew they would not come back. He drank and returned slowly to his ledge, pausing several times to look back and growl an angry challenge. The hair on his shoulders still stood

stiff when he lay down in front of his doorway and began to lick his wounds.

His ribs had been gashed and one ear had been torn. One leg was laid open and that tender left shoulder was bleeding again. But he had won his battle. Not against such great odds as four coyotes might seem, for they are cowardly fighters and soon discouraged. But it was victory, for all that. And as Vol lay there licking his wounds clean the breeze in the valley whipped the blue-topped grass into a soft song of satisfaction. Vol was no longer a pup. He was a dog of full stature, who ruled a valley.





CHAPTER III  
MOON LAKE







### CHAPTER III

## MOON LAKE

#### I

THE days grew into weeks and Vol's light summer coat was replaced by a heavier, rougher coat of sand-colored hair with a thick undercoat of shorter, softer hair next his skin. Nights became frosty. Days took on that hazy atmosphere of fall and the sun swung so far southward that it no longer fell directly in Vol's doorway on clear mornings. The flats that had been green turned bronze as the grama grass and buffalo sod ripened, and the blue-stem in the valleys turned a

rich golden hue. Then the ducks began to fly southward.

Several nights in succession Vol heard the soft chatter high overhead in the darkness and one misty evening a flock flew so low that he could hear the whistle of wind through their speeding wings. With the seasonal change came a change in the dog. Deep inside him there was a new restlessness. He left his den earlier in the evenings, returned later. He ranged far, and his travels finally spread over into the daylight hours. Often, too, when he stopped to drink in one of Willow Creek's pools he stood at the water's edge and looked for minutes at a time, apparently seeing nothing, yet seeing much—things that were not in the landscape. Vol was seeing pictures out of the past, pictures out of his own heritage and his own experience. He saw sheep, great herds of them, and dogs in groups of five and ten. He saw many herders, Louie among them. He heard the blatt of many flocks being gathered at the Home Ranch for the fall feeding and the trips to the railroad for shipment. Yet into such pictures always crept still another memory—Dutch John and Fritz, his badger. When that memory came, Vol shook his head as though to rid himself of a pesky fly, then drank and hurried off.

Other times Vol wandered far out on the flats west of the valley, most often when the moon rode high and round. There he loped mile after mile beneath that yellow moon, pausing for no scent, swerving to neither

right nor left for rabbit, coyote or quail, but loping there as though he saw nothing at all. He was a gaunt ghost, at such times, leaping across the night flats after something that not even Vol could make out in the uncertain light. Or, perhaps, loping there after nothing at all.

More frequently, though, Vol was his usual self, a bit faster perhaps and his nose a bit keener. The young Long-Eared Ones, the jack rabbits, had grown nearly as large as the older ones, and they were fully as fast, but Vol ran them down as easily as he had captured them two months before. His legs were tireless, his strong jaws both accurate and steel thewed. He was ready for the winter. His country's children had grown up, but while they were growing up Vol himself had grown canny, keen and strong. He had not been left behind by the swing of the seasons.

Nights when he stayed in the valley, however, he soon came to see new creatures, strange winged persons on his familiar waterholes. He would travel silently down the valley until he approached a pool. Then, with habitual caution, he would approach the water in an even more silent trot. He would thrust his nose through the browning grass at the edge of the water. And more often than not he would see dark birds floating in that liquid mirror which still held the glow of the sky. There would be soft sounds of little splashing feet, and there would be murmurs of "quack-quack-quack, uh, uh, uh, uh, quack-quack." Green heads and brown

heads and silvery heads would gleam like polished metal in the starlight, and gray backs would shine like the moon itself.

Vol would step into the water, and the ducks would rush together in sudden fright, chattering in soft excitement, some of them even leaping clear of the water and beating it to a glowing froth with their wingtips as they tried half-heartedly to take to the air. Then, as Vol drank quietly, they would settle back and watch him in silence from the far side of the pool.

This would be repeated many times during an evening, for Vol could pass no pool without stopping. But after the first few nights the clamor ended. The ducks realized that, whether this tawny creature were friend or not, he certainly was not an enemy, and they suffered him to come almost into their midst without taking flight.

Then came a night in late October when Vol went down the valley very much as usual. He fed on cottontail soon after he left his den. Then he began his nightly round of the pools, curious about the gabbling visitors. At the first waterhole he was greeted with a chorus of subdued chuckling. A big flock was there and evidently had been there some time, for they showed not the slightest fear, some swimming so close to him as he drank that their strange, curled tail feathers almost brushed his muzzle. But the moon was round and the night called. Vol went on down the valley.

As he passed one pool after another the valley broad-



ened out, low hills replacing the bluffs higher upstream. He came to a pool wider than the others, edged with tall reeds that rustled gently in the light wind. As Vol nosed through the reeds a strange commotion came from the water, louder and more excited than usual, it seemed. As the dog pushed the reeds aside with his muzzle he saw large birds floating there, twice as big as ducks, birds with bodies gray as pools on sunless days, long, black necks and heads that in the moonlight shone dark as night itself. Gray and black, with two patches of white, one beneath the chin, the other on the breast. Wild geese, regal birds of all the water-loving ones, rode the glassy water there as Vol watched. They belonged on that moon-lit pool as surely as the reeds belonged along its banks, and Vol sensed it. He turned away, lest he frighten them into taking wing.

On down the valley perhaps two miles lay Moon Lake, another such pool edged with tall grass and glowing on such nights as this with a clear, cold blueness like the sky itself. Moon Lake it was because when the moon rode full overhead it rested in Moon Lake's waters with almost equal beauty. Vol turned now toward Moon Lake and what it might hold.

## 2

MEPHISTO, the skunk, poked his black nose from his den, saw that the sun was setting, and came out into the open air for the first time that day. Autumn always

made Mephisto feel sleepy, and down in his warm, snug nest he felt so comfortable that he seldom stirred except at night, at this season of the year. Now he nosed the air thoughtfully, his beady black eyes shining and his plume of a tail waving the very least bit in the slight breeze.

This was a bad time of the year for the skunk. Spring was better, much better. For in the spring the birds were making nests and laying eggs, even hatching out fledglings. And eggs and fledglings were choice articles of Mephisto's diet. Then there were always young field mice, young ground squirrels, young prairie dogs—though he seldom caught them—and all the young creatures of his plains country, young and easy to catch. Now, when the grass had crisped from green to brown and the moon had begun to gleam again instead of glowing as it did in the summer, Mephisto was at more trouble to keep his belly full. He had to catch full grown mice and ground squirrels, if he would have such meat. Or if he chose to eat grubs he now had to tear up soil that had baked all summer beneath a searing sun, instead of the soft soil loosened by days of spring rain. All told, it was a bad season for skunks, this fall weather.

As Mephisto stood at the mouth of his den on the hillside, he looked down into the valley below him, Willow Creek Valley, and especially at the long, thin waterhole half a mile to the north, where a reflected light from the evening sky made it glow like polished

steel. Moon Lake, the wild ones called that pool. Mephisto looked at it now and gnashed his teeth at the thought of there being no nests of water-bird eggs there for him to plunder. In the spring there were many such nests, of curlew and killdees, and snipes and a few ducks, for the lake was six hundred paces long. Often Mephisto had gone down there, in the spring-time, and gorged himself on eggs until he could scarcely walk back up the hill.

Now he gnashed his teeth and grunted at the thought. For his stomach craved eggs to-night, eggs or young birds. Then he wandered away down the hillside, up the valley rather than down toward Moon Lake, however.

A hundred paces from his dooryard, Mephisto caught the scent of mice, traced it to a tuft of grass, and ambled closer. His black eyes glared into the thicket, his thin nose quivered with excitement and eagerness. Closer and closer he crept, then with an agility almost grotesque for his figure, he plunged in and lifted his white-blazed face toward the light again with a wriggling brown little creature between his teeth. His first course was on his plate, one might say; Mephisto had begun his evening meal.

On down the hillside the skunk made his leisurely way, investigating bush and grass tuft methodically as he passed, and two more luckless mice found their way down his gullet within the next half hour.

Then Mephisto nosed into one grass tuft with par-

ticular eagerness. There was a strong odor of meat here. Suddenly, almost from beneath his nose, a Long Eared One, a great jack rabbit, leaped out and thrashed through the grass as he sped away a few yards, then halted, stood on his hind legs, and looked back at the angry skunk. Mephisto gazed in intense hatred at the rabbit, eyes flashing, teeth bared. Long Ears had frightened the mice Mephisto sought. Long Ears had even given Mephisto something of a surprise, and Mephisto did not like surprises. He felt that he could never be frightened, but he occasionally was startled, and it left him with an unwelcome feeling that his eyes or his ears or his nose had not been keen enough.

Now he was distinctly annoyed, and when Long Ears settled down onto all fours and turned back toward the grass clump from which the skunk had frightened him—for Long Ears had been asleep—then Mephisto even snarled. Long Ears came to within ten paces, and the skunk made a stiff-legged little run toward him. Only a few steps, however, and then the skunk halted, spat in anger and waited. Long Ears hopped closer. Once more Mephisto hissed his contempt. Then, in a sudden burst of anger, he scurried toward the rabbit, whirled about as if on a pivot, and squirted a vile smelling stream of spray toward the rabbit. A thick stench filled the air, choking and sickening, and Long Ears turned and fled. The spray had barely reached him, but so persistent was its odor that no matter how fast Long Ears ran, he still had that smell somewhere about him.

Mephisto flaunted his tail in triumph, and continued his disgruntled way down the hillside. Everything was wrong, and he liked nobody this evening—not that he ever did like his neighbors, but now and then he had flashes of restraint that made him almost tolerable.

Now he could find no mice. Every place Mephisto went, the mice either heard or smelled him and were gone. He looked for ground squirrels, with no better success. There were no birds on the ground, no eggs, no fledglings. Mephisto grumbled over and over to himself his hatred of the world and its people.

Then he thought he would eat grubs. There must be some near the waterhole just ahead, in its soft banks, perhaps. He ambled along, surly and discontented.

But at the waterhole Mephisto found only the deep footprints of a herd of antelopes, which had roiled up the pool and slushed about its banks all afternoon. There would be no grubs here now. And with inward snorts of intense anger, he turned away. Then the clamor of ducks among the tall grass at the shallow end of the pool caught his ear. But even as he hesitated, he knew he would not eat duck meat. That would involve a flash-quick body, perhaps even would get his feet wet. And Mephisto was slow, and he hated water. So with mutterings to himself, he turned and wandered on down the valley. Perhaps at other pools he would find grubs, or soft ground where he might dig out grubs. Or in the tall valley grass he might find mice.



With a terrible grouch against the whole world, Mephisto ambled down toward Moon Lake.

## 3

WHILE Vol, the dog, and Mephisto, the skunk, were working down Willow Creek Valley toward that long silvery waterhole called Moon Lake, on the hill to the west of that glowing pool a third plains dweller was wriggling from his den and watching the sky above, the earth below and the air between with an air of insolence that seemed entirely unwonted in so small a creature. His legs were no more than two inches long and little bigger than a stem of tall grass. His body was so slim he could squirm through a two-inch crack; scarcely thicker than the body of a fat field mouse.

He hesitated now in the mouth of his little den, head and forelegs outside and his long, thin neck twisting about so that he might look in all directions. His eyes were blacker and even more beady and cruel than those of Mephisto. His nose wriggled with the utmost sensitiveness, and his lip lifted to reveal teeth like needles. His color was reddish brown, almost sandy, and his face was marked with light and dark lines so that it looked a bit like that of Scar Face, the badger. It was a cruel face, with cunning in every line and with eyes that challenged the whole world.

Apparently satisfied with the condition of the world, this strange creature stretched its long neck, lifted its

black forepaws and moved. Inch by inch the long slender body emerged from the hole; inch after inch. Was there no end to him? More, and still more! He was grotesque, almost snakelike, except for those two short legs in front. Then, when an onlooker would have given up hope of seeing other legs, they, too, emerged from the hole and Red Demon stood in the dusk, his slender tube of a body fully eighteen inches long, and a four-inch, black-tipped tail completing the picture.

Red Demon was variously known as a weasel and as a black-footed ferret, and sometimes as a prairie-dog killer. But, by whatever name he was known, Red Demon was the fiercest fighter of all the plains. More cruelty and bloodthirsty venom flowed in his small veins than in the biggest grizzly bear that ever roamed the mountains. Nature wisely kept him small, or there would have been neither room nor safety in all that land for any other creature.

The Red Demon now moved off down the hillside, vanishing in the short grass with scarcely a trace of motion. He glided rather than loped, his evil head carried only high enough that he might see without being seen. Down toward the waterhole known as Moon Lake the Demon worked his way.

Last night he had killed heavily. The taste of blood lingered, and the traces of it still stained the fur beneath his throat. Last night Red had found a flock of late quail sleeping in a weed thicket. Red had slid in among them, silent as a shadow. One after another the



soft throats had been pierced by Red's needle teeth, so deftly pierced that not one sound escaped. Then those cruel teeth had faltered by a hair's breadth. One quail had peeped feebly as it died. Instantly the others were awing, roaring away to safety. And Red had stood there in the moonlight, wide-mouthed, beady-eyed, hissing his anger. Red had killed only seven quail.

That was how the Demon killed, and why. Not for meat—one quail would have more than gorged his meager body—but for blood. And had he not faltered and betrayed himself, he would have left full twenty lifeless bodies, not a mere seven, in that weed patch before he left the spot.

Now, in his journey down the hillside, the Demon paused, motionless as the grass around him. His long neck was stiff and his beady eyes glinting. A moment he hesitated thus, then he seemed to rise from the ground, more than ever like a snake. His short fore-legs folded close to his body and he stood there on those black hind legs, nosing the air and gazing intently into the valley below. He was so straight and thin that he might well have been mistaken for a thick weed stalk or, at most, for a pair or a trio of weed stalks grown close together.

Far below him Red Demon saw the flash of Moon Lake, with its slightly rippled waters. On the pool rode shadows that came and went, came again, with peculiar regularity. His sharp ears caught a faint clamor. As he continued to watch he might have seen the water gleam

again and, an instant later, be darkened by those shadows, a whole flock of them, as they floated toward the bank.

Satisfied, the Demon dropped to all fours again and continued through the grass. There were ducks on Moon Lake to-night. The Demon's eyes glittered and his nose wrinkled so that his upper lip was lifted from those needle-sharp teeth that knew so well the soft flesh beneath soft feathers.

## 4

Two hundred yards from the upper end of Moon Lake Vol caught a familiar, distasteful scent. Mephisto had been through this grass only a short time before. Lifting his offended nose and sniffing the cleaner air, Vol swerved and went to the edge of the valley where the scent was not so strong. But as he approached the pool the odor of the skunk grew constantly stronger. Vol knew Mephisto had not only come this way but even yet was not far off.

The dog mounted a little spur of the hillside and looked down at the waterhole, lying beneath the half light like a rippling patch of the starry sky. Faint gabblings came to his ears, together with little splashings and sounds of slight commotion. Then he saw a fleet of shadows drift out from one bank of the pool, pause in the center of the channel, group themselves and float away around a bend as though they had been clouds caught in a night wind.

Vol returned to the valley floor and lazied toward the upper end of the pool again. He was thirsty. Now he paid no heed to Mephisto's scent, which still lingered. The old fellow was out after mice or unwary quail. Vol would not meet him. But it was one of those tricks of the wild that Mephisto must leave his vile scent wherever he went to abuse the sensitive noses of all who came after. Vol sniffed and almost sneezed.

He entered the tall grass at the edge of the water-hole, nosed through the reeds and felt the water between his toes. As he stood there the pool was more satisfying than ever before. The ripples caught the flame of the moon, sent it glowing in slivers of light, and the shadows between the ripples caught and briefly held pinpoints of starlight. Halfway down the pool floated the ducks, their dark, burnished heads reflecting the same moonlight in sharp glints very like the stars themselves.

Then Vol waded on in until he stood belly-deep in the water. He lowered his head and began to lap the coolness, rolling the water eagerly in his mouth. He had a vast sense of peace and well-being. So different, this pool was, from the brackish, muddy pools of the open flats in midsummer, where there was no coolness, no glowing moonlight, no ducks, but only screeching killdees.

As he lifted his head his eye caught a movement on the left bank. A flash of white was reflected by the moonlight, then something shadowy moved above the

grasstops, waved and moved on, waved again. In that shadow was a flicker of white. Vol stood stock-still, only the drip-drip of water from his lower jaw breaking the silence. Then the shadow reached an opening in the grass and Vol resumed his drinking. Now he knew it was Mephisto. He had seen Mephisto's tail flaunting there; now he had seen Mephisto's blazed face as well.

Finishing his drink, the dog continued to stand in the cool water. The ducks now had wheeled about in the center of the pool and came slowly toward him. They, like the wild geese, were a part of the water. They belonged here, as eagles belonged high overhead among the white clouds of a summer day, or as sheep belonged on the greening hillsides in springtime.

The leader of the flock swerved, gabbled softly and led the whole party, fifteen or twenty of them, toward the west bank. As they approached the shore they began thrusting their dark heads down beneath the water, wriggling their funny tails in eagerness and sometimes thrusting their grotesquely short legs clear of the water as they probed the muddy bottom for food. Closer and closer to the bank they worked until one of them stood on the bottom and waddled out. On water she had been a creature of grace and beauty. On land she became a mere awkward bird, with legs too short and wrongly placed. Certainly these folk belonged on water or in the air, not on dry land. But others followed the first one, and soon half a dozen of them were chuckling

there among the grasses, gulping down weed seed that pleased their taste.

Vol had never killed a duck. These birds, somehow, never had seemed like game to be taken. They were a part of the air, the water and the whole scene of an autumn night. Vol's needs were met by rabbits that he took in fair chase, and there were plenty of Long-Eared Ones. Had he been prodded by long hunger, perhaps the ducks, too, would have added to his fare. But this was no time of want. To Vol these birds were as impersonal and far removed from food as the air, the sky or the moon itself. He watched them only with a strange fascination, as he might have watched a puppy at play.

Suddenly something happened. There was a flutter of wings and a series of frightened squawks. Those ducks that had been ashore feeding rushed for the water. Those still in the water wheeled and sped away like tumbleweeds in a stiff wind. Three of those on shore squawked loudly, reached the water and beat frantically with their wings as they fled.

Something was very wrong.

Had Mephisto been up to his old tricks? Mephisto was over there somewhere. But surely not Mephisto! He was not quick enough to kill such as these. He was clever and quick, to be sure, but not that clever or that quick. And besides, he might be dragged into the water if he tackled a duck. Vol knew nothing displeased Mephisto more than wet feet.

But two ducks lay there on the ground, motionless. Then the breeze brought Vol a new scent, and his eyes saw a thin, swift shadow there in the grass beside those ducks.

Vol was out of the water in an instant, hurrying around the lake toward where the excitement had begun. As he ran he saw Mephisto's tail waving there again, at the very spot where the ducks had been so strangely attacked.

## 5

As Mephisto stood above Moon Lake, watching the ducks on the water below him, anger surged through his ill-tempered heart. He was hungry. But there were no little ducks to be had. There were no eggs. The little mice had all grown big and wise. The grubs were all deep underground. And the skunk was hungry. There below, on that glowing pool, were ducks, scores of them. Mephisto saw food, felt the gripe of an empty belly and could do nothing about it. After watching the ducks a time he snuffled to himself, wrinkled his nose angrily and sought the runways through the taller grass. He might find a mouse.

His course, unconsciously chosen, took him toward the pool. Fifty paces from the bank he heard excited gabbling from the water. When he reared up to look he saw that the flock had swum in close to the shore. Now one duck was scrambling out of the water. Another followed, and another. They chattered over the



weed seed they found, working back into the grass.

The skunk's eyes glowed with hope. He dropped to all fours again and started toward the water. Perhaps, after all, there was a meal awaiting him. He padded lightly, slipped from one shadow to the next, threaded silently toward those feeding waterbirds. Once he paused to look through a clearing in the grass. The ducks were climbing ever further from the water, interested only in the new delicacy.

When the skunk was only ten paces away from them he paused behind a grass clump, tense and eager. From there he could slip down closer to the lake and cut off the bird's retreat. He moved with a cunning and caution uncanny in such an apparently clumsy beast. He was now only eight paces from them. Then seven. A few more moments, now, and his meal would be assured. He almost had them cornered. He crouched, ready for the rush—

A long, thin shadow flashed in the moonlight. Bright teeth gleamed an instant. Wings fluttered, beat the air. Ducks squawked in surprise and fear. And even as they tumbled and squawked toward the water that shadow flashed among them again. Then there was a splashing, a beating of frightened wings and the ducks were gone.

All in an instant, between two breaths!

The bodies of two ducks lay among the grass. Between them, facing the water, stood Red Demon, his head high on that long, snaky neck, his teeth gleaming



white as he glowered after those birds that had fled safely.

The skunk stood as though dumbfounded. He had met this long-necked little Demon before—at a distance. He had never knowingly crossed Red's purposes or disputed right of way with him. Instinctively the skunk knew better. But last night he had found those quail the Demon had left in the weed clump, and he had feasted on what the Demon had spurned. It seemed impossible that the Demon, who had left those quail, would now insist on his right to these ducks. Mephisto slowly moved toward the Demon's kill.

But Mephisto reckoned without the Demon's temper—always a questionable matter, but just now particularly savage. For Red had set his teeth for much slaughter. He had failed. He was aching for any excuse to fight. He must have heard the skunk's movement, for his sharp-nosed head turned quickly. His lips parted again in a snarl. He hissed a warning.

But the skunk was almost within reach of the nearest duck. He looked up but did not halt. Again Red warned him. Mephisto paused with one foot on the duck.

Red had spun around now, fully facing the skunk. His head wove from side to side on that snake-like neck. His little feet moved him a few inches closer to the intruder. In a wink the skunk spun around on his feet, flashed his tail high and let fly a thin spray. He had found his meal. He now set about defending it.

But Mephisto did not know the Red Demon as well

as he might have. He did not yet know that there are creatures in this world on which it is never wise to turn one's back, even though fortified with a most unpleasant weapon. And, worse yet, just as Mephisto spun around he saw Vol, the dog from the den in the bluff, hurrying toward him.

## 6

AT the sight, Vol stopped short.

There stood Mephisto, helpless as a trapped coyote, and from the skunk's black throat swung a thin, lithe shadow. Mephisto reared on his hind legs, shook his head violently from side to side, reached and grasped and clawed with his forepaws, and still that shadow clung there beneath his jaws.

The dog knew it was a weasel. He saw that long, yellowish-red body, the black-tipped tail and the dark little legs. And somehow he sensed what had happened. He also sensed what was happening to the skunk. Death had fastened to Mephisto's throat.

The skunk tried to flee. With great, frantic leaps he tried to fling off that clutching thing. Then in the midst of a leap his legs tautened. He fell to the ground. The legs relaxed an instant and all four feet raked vainly at the wriggling body of the weasel. Then he released all his terrible, choking spray. And still those fierce jaws clung to his black throat.

The air was heavy with the stench, but there was no sound from the fighters. The grass rustled; there was

a thud as the skunk leaped half in the air and fell back. Then his teeth gnashed, clicked and gnashed again with a sharp, grating sound. The thrashing died away. Only one leg moved, twitched convulsively. The battle was over.

An instant later the Demon appeared, head high once more and teeth still bared. He slithered toward the ducks. And Vol, standing there in the grass, knew what had happened. Mephisto was not the villain this time. He had been an intruder, after the crime. Vol moved.

The Demon saw the movement. His head was up in a flash. He stood there, poised like a snake, just as he had faced the skunk. But Vol did not wait for the attack. He knew, instinctively, who the Demon was and how he fought. Vol had seen the Demon before, had watched him at work among the prairie dogs. Vol knew his lightning speed and the great ferocity in his small body. Vol rushed him.

The Demon was tired from his fight with the skunk. The thrashing about had battered his small body and taken both speed and spring from it. His head darted toward the on-coming dog's throat with the speed of a gnat, for all that. But the dog's throat, at the instant, was not there. Vol, too, was lightning-fast. The Demon's strike missed. Vol's did not. The weasel was caught between two quick, strong jaws.

Instantly the dog knew his first grasp was too far back. The weasel writhed like a snake. His needle-

teeth caught flesh. They seared in Vol's lower lip. For an instant Vol, too, thrashed about in mad fury. Then he shifted his hold. But in the same instant the weasel, too, shifted his hold, and as he lashed out his teeth missed Vol's eye by little more than a hair. They found no hold, but they laid open the flesh.

Again the dog shifted his grip, and still Red Demon sought that vein beneath the jaws that he seemed unerringly to find in his battles. But not this time. Vol's teeth were driving home. Red's efforts slackened. He sagged. The fire died from his eyes. But even after Vol dropped the killer's broken body those relentless muscles continued to twitch. Death came hard for the Demon.

Vol had drunk and then lain down in the cool water to lave his gashed face before he realized that the ducks were no longer in sight on Moon Lake. Perhaps they had merely gone around the bend. Perhaps they had flown elsewhere. He lay there several minutes, the water pleasantly cool in the stinging wound. Then he stood up and looked at the bank where, only a short time ago, those daring ones of the flock had gabbled excitedly over the weed seed. There lay two dragged bundles of feathers, awkward, lifeless. They were no longer ducks, really. They were something else, something ugly and not belonging to Moon Lake. The whole of the pool had changed. The fetid skunk odor hung in the air. Two ugly, battered, furry things lay beside the dead ducks. And as the dog stood there a

cloud drifted over the moon, completing the desolation of the scene.

Vol turned away. Vol did not know tragedy, but deep inside he could sense a wrongness in his world. He shook himself and trotted up the valley a way. There he paused to rub his nose and throat in the clean grass, as if to rid himself of an unpleasant feeling. He shook himself again. He sneezed. Then, his body cleansed of the foulness as completely as he could cleanse it, he turned toward the flats to the west. But as he vanished over the hilltop he was no longer trotting. He was loping, wolf-like. Vol was plainly in haste to get somewhere far away.





CHAPTER IV  
SCAR FACE









## CHAPTER IV

### SCAR FACE

#### I

**I**F THE weather had been different, or if it had been February instead of December, Vol probably would not have done what he did. He had keen senses and good judgment. He could size up a situation better than most dogs. And he was even-tempered, notably so considering the mixed blood that flowed in his veins. But it was the first week in December and the half inch of snow on the ground gave the air a tang that made Vol feel he was master of everything on the plains.

It had snowed during the night and when Vol awakened he knew without poking his nose out of doors that the change had come. Then when he stood on his high ledge and blinked at the shimmering world he snarled in sheer joy at being alive. He raced down the hillside to the waterhole, where he had to thrust a

paw through a thick scum of ice before he could drink.

The icy water tasted good in his mouth. The flaky snow felt good underfoot. The sharp air in his nostrils and nipping at his ears carried vigorous life. He satisfied his thirst quickly and dashed around the waterhole, for no reason at all. Had he been at Camp Number Seven he would have nipped Buck or Juno and then led a long chase down across the valley below the windmill and back around the far shoulder of the hill. But he was not back at Camp Number Seven. He was alone, in Willow Creek Valley—and a king! So he hurried down the valley, tail high, eyes gleaming, almost swaggering.

His blood was still racing and his legs had just limbered up completely when he flushed a cottontail rabbit, almost from under his nose. Bounce-Tail streaked away across the crystal-covered grass amazingly fast. But Vol was well under way when the rabbit jumped. Had Bounce-Tail been nearer his burrow there would have been no question about the result. But when a cottontail must dash seventy yards with a dog less than a leap behind, tiny lungs and legs are often unequal to the task. Moreover, the cold had stiffened Bounce-Tail's legs ever so little while it had put new energy into Vol's legs. The difference meant a meal for the dog.

When he had eaten, Vol trotted on down the valley, which was crisscrossed with rabbit trails in the new snow. He nosed the first one, found it was old and hurried on to the next. There he eyed the little footprints

with a wise eye, sniffed them vigorously and puffed out his breath so suddenly that he raised a cloud of snow crystals like a tiny whirlwind's dust cone. But that trail, too, was several hours old. And so Vol went down the valley, leaving a trail of his own that twisted and wound about like a stream in a rock-strewn valley.

Once he found the trail of a field mouse, dainty, elf-like tracks so close together they seemed interlaced into a single chain. The fluff of snow had frozen enough to bear the weight of the little fellow, and there on the surface lay that faintly traced tale of the brown midget's hasty inspection of a tumbleweed, of his trip to a clump of grama grass whose seed heads he had reached and rifled, of his little six-inch leaps as he fled some enemy and darted for the little hole whose brown mouth gaped now like a dull, dark eye in the snow.

Five paces further on Vol learned what had frightened the mouse. Long Face, the coyote, had come down from the plains to the east, and there were his telltale tracks. But this time the brownie who left a trail like lace was too quick for Long Face. The coyote evidently had seen the mouse scurry to safety, for his trail halted there, then turned abruptly away and swung across the valley toward the prairie-dog town a mile to the west.

Vol went on and on, until he was two miles or more below his home in the bluff before he left the valley. Then he crossed a jack-rabbit trail so fresh he forgot everything else in the joy of the chase. The Long-

Eared One had gone directly across the valley and up the hill to the left.

Vol headed up the hill at a lope, nose close to the tracks underfoot and eyes roving the ground ahead. The hill was an easy slope, but the crunch of Vol's feet in the snow crust echoed sharply in the chill air. Just as he topped the rise he saw Long Ears leap into action twenty paces ahead. No more trailing. Now it was a chase.

But Long Ears had been abroad since dawn. His legs were limbered up. And the keen air livened him as much as it did Vol. It was a fair race, with odds neither asked nor given.

For a mile they sped, Vol gaining at first until he was within two leaps of the rabbit. Then the Long-Eared One came to a slight rise, laid his ears close to his thrumming shoulders and began to gain at every jump. He was an old-timer, with steel sinews tempered in four years of constant racing from death. Vol was no match for *him*. And the last half mile the dog loped along hopelessly outdistanced, keeping in the race for the mere thrill of action. Panting great clouds of steamy breath he finally turned off on a bypath.

## 2



By the time the sun was overhead, Vol was far out on the rolling plains that stretched from Willow Creek Valley to the rocky canyons of the foothill country. Here on the table-land lay a vast pocked area where, all spring and summer, prairie dogs worked from dawn till dusk stripping the buffalo grass further and further back from the mounds that marked their burrow entrances, hauling fresh dirt from the underground passageways and plastering their entrance ways with fresh mud after each rainstorm. Just now it was a mud-splattered plain of white, for the sun had softened the snow and the villagers had been out clearing their dooryards, making neighborly visits, working on already perfect entrances and digging grass roots or garnering seeds that had been overlooked in the past weeks of busy autumn.

Vol had been in the village before, but never at this season. He stopped at the town's outskirts and watched.

The little homes covered an area more than two miles across, with the doughnut-shaped mounds seldom more than thirty feet apart. Literally thousands of the rodents lived in this one settlement, which must have been undermined with many miles of tunnels. Some of the mounds rose only a few inches above the level of the land, but others lifted their cones as high as the dog's shoulder. Nearly every one of them showed the prints of little feet on their sun-baked surface, prints strangely like those of miniature human hands, for the prairie dogs were artisans of undeniable skill and patience. Hour after hour they would work at those mounds, patting each new dab of mud into place with skillful forepaws.

Now the villagers were scattered. The fat old mothers, looking like faded red squirrels grown foolishly plump, waddled among their more graceful children and boldly disputed their right to the more tasty roots. Elderly father "dogs" sat beside their mounds and drowsed in the sun. Here and there youngsters raced about in play.

A flutter of wings and squeals of protest near by caught Vol's attention. A burrowing owl, such as made those harshly mournful cries at summer dusk, was demanding the right to live in the same burrow with a prairie dog whose ideas of a private home did not include tolerance of a stranger who wore wings and



feathers. The owl sat on the entrance mound, wings half-spread, head thrust forward, screaming defiance at the little animal who faced the bird five feet away.

The owl scolded and the prairie dog threatened. Then the animal made a rush. But with a nimble hop and a flapping of wings the owl lifted himself clear of the angry teeth, fluttered there in the air while the attacker waited in baffled rage and, as the prairie dog withdrew, the bird settled back on the mound in the most insolent show of defiance.

The little animal made half a dozen futile rushes. Then, with a squeal of anger, he dived into the burrow, only to chatter back with gurgling noises such as pebbles make when they go clunk-clunking into deep water holes. But the owl, his feathers still fluffed in excitement, only settled there at the top of the mound and defied him. When Vol approached, the bird screeched at him, hopped into the air when he came too close, then settled back on the chosen perch when Vol walked on. Evidently the owl was set on staying there, welcome or not.

Several times as the dog trotted from burrow to burrow he was tempted to dash after one of the brown villagers. The morning's vigor was strong in his blood. Twenty paces off, one of the bravest townsmen would sit, watching him. Then he would hop a few feet to a root he had been watching before Vol appeared. Vol would veer toward him. The prairie dog would hesitate a moment then, rearing to his full height on his

hind legs, he would scream, "Claa-aa-aa!" The scream appeared to be a danger signal. With it every villager near by would scurry for his burrow, dart inside and, if he were still bold, thrust his head back out to see what was happening.

And the alarm-giver, his signal uttered, fled with the others.

The audacity of the performance finally irked the dog beyond his judgment. As one of those sentinels stretched himself skyward and screamed, Vol was after him. The alarm ceased with the cry half uttered. The sentinel fled, pell-mell. Had he made for the hole Vol expected him to, Vol would have caught his first prairie dog. But he did not. There was another mound, on beyond, dozens of them, in fact. The prairie dog made for one of them. And in ten jumps Vol was poking his muzzle down an earth cone from the bottom of which the little brown fugitive chattered jeeringly and in complete safety. Vol whined in anger. He ripped at the mound with an eager forepaw. He ripped away a big clod, then another. Then his claws found hard-baked earth, and his eagerness quickly waned. Tail high, he walked stiff-legged and disdainfully away.

Twice again his enthusiasm overcame his judgment. Then he approached the outskirts of the far side of the village, and he saw something that made him forget prairie dogs.

Vol saw the earth move. Only a handful, it was, of

dry, yellow dirt. But it seemed to leap from the ground. And scarcely had it settled when another handful followed it—up, then down, rolling and spreading over a little mound ten paces to one side of the dog's path.

## 3

SOMEBODY was digging a hole. That was the way Scar Face, the badger, did things. Once beneath the surface of the ground he tore the earth loose with his powerful forepaws, pushed it back beneath his belly and then heaved it still further back with his broad hind feet. As Vol halted to watch, he smelled that certain scent of Scar Face, a scent he would never forget. That scent and the rank tallow odor went with Dutch John. Vol circled closer and waited.

Now he could hear the "scrunch, scrunch, scrunch" of the badger's claws against the hard soil. They scrunched, then paused, then scrunched again. And in the pauses the little handfuls of yellow dirt came leaping into the air. Then came a longer pause, and the earth belched up from the hole in a rapid flow. Scar Face was backing out of his new den, clearing the way as he came. The heap of fresh earth had grown so high it kept tumbling back in. The badger probably would come out and clear it away.

He came. Scar Face had none of the caution of the lesser animals in facing the open. He stalked boldly

out, his striped face noticeably like that of a long-nosed, ill-tempered bear, except that the two black streaks that mounted from his black muzzle parted there between his eyes and vanished in the grizzled sand color of his neck. His body, too, was bear-like, though broader and even shorter legged. About half Vol's length, he wore a coat of stiff hair shading from deep brown along his spine to a shaggy white on his belly.

Scar Face ignored the dog, crouched there not five paces away. He must have seen Vol, for his little pig-eyes swept the whole range as he emerged, but as he set to moving the dirt from his doorway he made no sign that he considered the dog worthy of attention.

But Vol demanded attention. He rushed the badger, still inspired with that early morning fervor. At the first sound of his movement Scar Face whirled with surprising speed. He seemed to flatten close to the ground. His mouth opened slightly and his lips parted to show long, yellowish teeth. He swayed, lifting first one forepaw then the other, both armed with long, bear-like claws.

Vol halted. The memory of Fritz, that other badger, and Camp Number Seven flamed in his consciousness. He had not really sought battle with this fellow. He had dashed in with more bravado than anything else. But now he bristled with full-grown anger. If this were not Fritz it was certainly one of Fritz's kind. Vol hesitated only an instant. He charged. But he sidestepped

as he closed in, making a flank attack. He ripped at that broad back as he leaped.

But Vol was not fast enough, even this day, for that sort of thing. He had grown mightily since those awful evenings when Fritz had cuffed him. But this badger was no Fritz, old and stiff and pampered. This badger was at the height of his fighting powers. And as Vol nipped him, Scar Face swung one of those forepaws, swung it swiftly as a gnat's flight. It found its mark. Scar Face slapped Vol very much the same as Fritz had slapped him.

Vol sneezed. He shook his head. He snarled in anger and chagrin. He whirled back to make a real fight of it, now that it had gone thus far. But Scar Face was gone. From his new burrow came the even breathing of a heavy body at rest, and the badger scent welled up strong for even Vol's bloody nose. The badger had given one stinging reminder that dogs were not wanted, then he had slid into his own haven.

Vol stood there some time in angry challenge. He even made a feeble effort at digging down to the badger—a foolish effort, for even had he persisted he could never have accomplished anything. Scar Face is the best digger on the whole plains, and even men with picks and spades have been put to shame by the claws of a busy badger. But Vol was thoroughly angry. The hair on his shoulders stood stiff and not even the gashes on his nose could sober him for some time. At last he gave up and cooled that nose in a snow drift. Soon he

was headed back east, toward Willow Creek Valley, not, however, without many halts and angry looks back at that spot where Scar Face was already building another heap of yellow earth at his new doorway.

Vol hurried on across the flats after that, eager for the icy waters of his own pool and for the jack rabbits of his own valley. The sun was behind him; already it threw a long shadow for him to follow. He was in need of more food.

Then, just over the hill from his own ledge, he paused for a mouthful of snow and another chance to cool his wounded muzzle in a drift. He had just started on when he saw exactly the same thing that had stopped him off there on the edge of the prairie-dog town. A handful of earth popped up from the surface of the ground.

Vol halted and watched, the hair on his shoulders lifting once more.

Another handful of dirt appeared. There was a whole heap of it soiling the snow, and the scar of a hole where some cousin of that Scar Face who had slapped him was now at work. And on the very brink of his valley! Only a little way from Vol's den!

The dog was distinctly angry. Scar Face was no friend at any time; he could not even be a good neighbor. In temper he was a cross between a rattlesnake and a wolverine or a weasel, and his grouch against the world always seemed to increase with winter. But besides being bad-tempered, Scar Face cleared his whole



neighborhood of birds, ground squirrels, mice, prairie dogs, snakes—even Mephisto, the skunk, seldom stayed long when Scar Face moved in.

As he had returned from the prairie-dog town Vol had vaguely sensed that he had meddled in affairs not entirely his own when he plagued the badger. He resented the gashes he received, and he probably would have meddled again, given the chance. But he felt no such self-confident satisfaction with himself as he had known that night the coyotes attacked him at his own doorway. This, however, was different. This badger was digging in Vol's own back yard. This badger was definitely the intruder.

Vol cautiously approached the scene of action. He found a newly started hole, and six inches down was a mass of loose dirt, moving as though alive. Vol sniffed, then snarled. The dirt heaved suddenly. A great double handful of it came boiling upward like lava from a volcano. Vol caught the full force of it in his face. He leaped back, shaking his head and blinking his eyes. If there had been any question about what he would do, it now was settled. The sound of digging ceased. Scar Face was about to come out. Vol waited, shoulder hair stiff in anger.

## 4

THE badger stood on the heap of fresh earth. His nose was smeared with the yellow clay and his eyes blinked



at the light. But he sensed something wrong. He nosed the air and found nothing. Vol was on the lea side of him. Scar Face scattered a part of the dirt with broad, able paws. Still the sense of wrongness persisted. He lifted his nose again, and this time he looked around, even behind him. In one motion he flattened toward the ground and hissed a warning. Almost in the same movement he had swung around, facing the new hole.

There was Vol. That escape was cut off.

For a moment nothing happened. Scar Face hissed and showed his teeth. And he backed slowly away, down off the fresh earth onto the snow-covered grass. Vol, himself half crouching, advanced until he was between the badger and the hole. And again the badger retreated a few steps.

Had Scar Face turned and run, even then, Vol might have let the matter pass. He still remembered Fritz, and something deep inside kept telling him that badgers always ripped and tore and punished one brutally; that dogs could not whip badgers. But Scar Face never fled. He was, in a way of speaking, made for movement only in one direction—ahead. He had come here out of season to dig a new home. He was going to do it or die in the attempt.

While the two stood facing each other and exchanging challenges the badger sidled around until he was ten feet from the hole. His feet were feeling their way and found a slight hollow. There he crouched.

Vol charged.

This time the dog gauged himself better than before. He remembered the lesson from earlier in the day. He lifted his head quickly to avoid that slashing paw, spun, caught Scar Face by the back, just behind the shoulders. His jaws clamped shut; with a lunge and a twist he swung the badger clear of the ground. In the same motion he tossed Scar Face to one side, still further from the hole.

All this in one leap. He was lightning fast, but even that was not fast enough. Three gashes, opened to the bone, seared along his jaw. One of Scar Face's forepaws had struck.

The badger landed on all four feet, cat-like. He was shaken, and he was further than ever from his hole, but, with long claws splayed, he started toward that fortress. He took only two steps. There was Vol, glaring into those hard eyes, almost close enough for Scar Face to reach with his murderous forepaws. Scar Face lifted one paw, hissed, crouched back on his hind quarters, swung that paw viciously. Vol shifted back out of danger. Back, then in again, with teeth ready for action. But there was no opening. He danced to one side, lured Scar Face with him and completed the circle. But the badger always faced him with those terrible claws. Vol hesitated to strike.

Twice he circled, waiting, watching. The blood from his torn jaw was spreading down over his chest now, staining the snow. He fainted, shifted and closed in. A snap, a slash, a scuffle of padded feet and Vol was

clear once more. Scar Face still hissed and held those dreadful weapons ready, but now a trickle of red flowed down from his shoulders. Vol's teeth had penetrated that wiry coat and found flesh.

Then Scar Face charged.

The badger hissed and clicked his teeth as he came. His short legs carried his squat body at surprising speed, and his fore feet were light as a dancer's, always ready for action. But before the badger could close with the dog, Vol was on the other side. As he leaped clear he caught at those shoulders again. Scar Face spun, with a hiss and a strange grunt. He charged. Vol leaped aside, this time sinking his teeth into the badger's flank.

Thus far the dog had the better of it. The badger's attacking game was exactly to Vol's liking. He was the more agile of the fighters. With the badger in the open, Vol had far the better chance to inflict damage. More than that, Scar Face was thoroughly angry now, and he was no longer cautious. Vol ripped him a dozen times, took only two more blows in return.

Scar Face had now maneuvered himself back to that little hollow his feet had found before. He paused there. He made no mad charges. Vol danced about, daring him on, but instead the badger ripped out a piece of sod with one forepaw. He ripped out another, and yet a third. There was one way a badger could fight—and win. He must fight a defender's battle. He must dig in. So as Vol circled and dared him on, Scar Face only spun about, balking attack while those pow-

erful front feet ripped at the soil. Frequently he paused to slash out with one or both those sabered paws, but always he returned to the task underfoot. He was hollowing out a basin in the sod.

## 5

BEFORE Vol knew what was happening, the badger crouched in a shallow pit that brought his hind quarters down even with the ground. As the dog worried the badger he now always faced that black-striped muzzle with its long fangs, those sabered forepaws, now so eager to slash and rip and maim. And the hind quarters were down in the hollow, down where Vol could reach them only over that head and those forepaws. The badger had dug himself in so that the dog could no longer bowl him over nor even slash his shoulders and hips without risking serious injury. The badger's position appeared invulnerable. The only way the dog could get to him was over Scar Face's strongest weapons.

Vol paused in his circling. He thrust his muzzle into the snow and gulped the white crystals. Then the blood from his nose, now dripping afresh, reached his lips and he snarled at the taste. Not since that first night Dutch John pitted him against Fritz had he been so thoroughly angry; not even that night when the coyotes attacked him. But now Vol had no fear of the badger.

In Camp Number Seven he was helpless with fear.

He saw the badger's attention waver. Scar Face still wanted to get back to that unfinished hole, that den that was so close to Vol's home he could have heard the digging from his own dooryard. Vol saw the badger's eyes turn to one side.

With a mouth still half filled with snow Vol leaped into action. Surprise is always a strong advantage. But the surprise was not complete. Scar Face met him almost bear-like, crouched back, both forepaws ready. Vol did not swerve. He closed straight in. His jaws snapped and his teeth clicked at Scar Face's throat. The badger was forced back until he stood upright and the two of them were in a fierce embrace.

Had it been spring or summer the fight would have ended there and Vol would have come off with wounds that would heal in a week. But it was not spring or summer. It was winter. Scar Face wore a coat of wire-stiff bristles, close packed. And he was fat with autumn feasting. With a lighter coat protecting it, Vol's teeth would have sunk deep into that throat and found vital arteries in that first snap. Now they closed only on a fold of thick skin and stiff hair. And as he snapped again and again, deeper toward that jugular vein, Scar Face used his own weapons.

Vol backed away in a daze. He should have ended the fight in that rush. Instead he had come within a hair's breadth of losing his own life. From jaw to shoulder two gashes laid the flesh open so that his right

side felt as though all the cactus thorns in the world were festering there. The other shoulder was ripped crosswise, fully as deep. And Scar Face crouched there in his pit, hissing and grunting and scarcely bleeding.

Another dog might have gone into frenzy. A coyote, had he ever entered such a fight, would have fled long ago. But Vol waited, narrow-eyed, puffing. The shock was soon over and the crisp air cooled the open wounds. His brain cleared.

That was the wrong way. An inch to one side and the badger's claws would have ended the battle. There would be no more of that. Vol became wary, though his anger still urged him on. Not to quick victory, now, but to sure victory.

Vol crept forward, more cautious. The badger reared himself in readiness, those forepaws twitching eagerly. Vol saw that he had found flesh after all. The badger's throat showed red. But too little of it for the price Vol had paid. He moved around, suddenly rushed in.

Scar Face lashed out again. But this time it was the old rush, the cautious, slashing rush. And as Scar Face dropped back into his pit he bore a new gash across his broad shoulders. Vol danced clear.

Twice, thrice, a dozen times Vol was in, out, now on one side, now on the other, always ripping and tearing at that broad back. Instead of the white flat where they had met, these two, the battlefield now was trampled into a dirty, blood-stained circle of brown, with that grizzled head, that broad back, those clicking teeth and



those eager claws at its center. And around it danced a dog, now stiffer, now slower, now infinitely more cautious than at first. Or was it a dog? He was streaked and torn and stained with battle. He limped. His jaws slavered and his eyes glowed almost red. He was crafty, and he bore fangs that ripped and tore. He was more a wolf, as he wavered there ever so slightly, yet more than a wolf. He was canine anger lifted to its greatest heights of fury.

Once more Vol was in, over, back again, slashing at those grizzled shoulders. But as he leaped clear now he sensed a change. Scar Face only half turned to face him. Scar Face lifted only one forbidding paw, and he slashed across rather than down. Without an instant's pause Vol knew this was the moment. He closed with the badger once more.

This time there was no feinting, no leaping aside. He drove straight in. Scar Face reared only half upright. His paws were there and his teeth were long and sharp as ever. They slashed and gashed with frightful fury. But behind them were feeble shoulders where muscles had been severed or weakened. And this time Vol's teeth found no mere mat of hair and flabby flesh at Scar Face's throat. This time there was what Vol's fangs sought. Vol's jaws closed precisely where they should. . . .

Until the muscles of that tawny body ceased to quiver those horrible claws splayed and grasped at the empty air, reached for the enemy they would never



again find. Vol stood there watching, wavering on his feet as he waited. Then the final convulsions shook the broad ribs, the claws ceased to clutch and the jaws snapped a last time. Scar Face deserted Vol's back yard forever. . . .

What had been an ideal winter day had, while the battle was being fought, turned sharply colder. A scum of clouds had settled into a deep bank in the west. There the sun had vanished, leaving the world to early dusk that already had the sting of night. When Vol finally turned toward the rim of his canyon there were hard, icy flakes in the air. A wind from the northeast whipped over the bluff and cut into his bleeding shoulders. The dog lifted his muzzle and sniffed that wind, by habit. It brought him no definite odor, but something fully as recognizable. The snow in the air would be more than a flurry. The wind brought, if not the smell of a blizzard, certainly a warning of storm.

Vol's shoulders ached with the poison of claws. His jaws were stiffening and his lungs hurt. He slaked his thirst at a growing snowdrift then slowly picked his way down the hillside to his own ledge. He paused only to sniff at half a jack rabbit he had left the night before. He needed rest more than food. He pushed through the entryway, turned twice around in the inner den and lay down with a grunt. The wind was whistling and moaning by turns as he began to lick his wounds, and before he settled down in restless sleep the icy flakes had heaped a little drift at the open doorway.



## CHAPTER V

### ICE







## CHAPTER V

### ICE

#### I

**V**OL slept late, not so much because his rest had been fitful as because his den, even when he finally did awaken, was quite dark. The outside doorway was completely closed and the little air hole through the earth above him was reduced to a narrow tube through which his warm breath filtered up into the sunlight outside, where it looked very much like a wispy thread of smoke floating up from the drifts. For it had snowed, snowed long and heavily.

Vol lifted his head and yawned. His jaws hurt him as he did so. Then he slowly got to his feet. His legs hurt as he stood up. He tried to stretch the least bit in the cramped quarters of his den, but the fury of all the

devils jabbed him in the jowls, on the chest and throat, down both front legs.

Blinking a moment, Vol sat down on the warm spot where he had slept. He had awakened to such complete discomfort that he had forgotten for the moment what had happened the night before. He must remember, must even think things over. While he thought, perhaps his forelegs would lose some of their shooting, cactus-thorn hurts and he might be able to yawn without having his nose twitch in sudden pain. Then he further changed his mind and lay out at full length again, the better to remember. And while Scar Face, the badger with whom Vol had fought a battle to the finish the night before, chased his ugly image through the dog's brain, Vol's warm, soft tongue soothed and smoothed the matted hair on his forelegs and paws.

His legs were well toileted when the first fleck of sunlight slid into the den. The snow in the doorway had melted down until the reflection from a drift on the ledge outside found its way through a hole no bigger than Vol's head.

Again the dog stood up and now he did not hesitate. Pushing his way confidently through the melting drift, he opened the passageway to the outside world and stood in his own dooryard, in a world so white and gleaming that he was quite blinded for several minutes.

All down across Willow Creek Valley below him lay the snow, smothering everything but a few black gashes

on the bluff opposite him. Down almost directly below where he stood, the sleepy eye of his private water-hole was all covered over and gray-looking, as if an ashen eyelid had closed. Overhead the hard, sharp sun hung far away in a sky like deep, deep ice.

Nothing alive was in sight, so Vol gulped a few mouthfuls of the snow close beneath his jaws, and plowed up the trail to the top of the bluff. He remembered Scar Face.

It was hard going with fifteen inches of snow everywhere, wet, heavy. And his forelegs were sore to the touch, would have hurt at even the gentle brushing of grama grass. The snow bit into them as the claws of Scar Face had bitten—and those claws had struck deep, razor-like and often. The dog's chest, shoulders and forelegs had been ripped to ribbons in the previous night's battle, and his throat had escaped by nothing less than a miracle. A moment he hesitated at the bluff's rim, then unerringly he went to a little drift, sniffed contemptuously, turned away. Beneath that heap of white lay the body of a big badger, his yellowish fangs still bared by his frozen lips, his long, chisel-sharp claws still set and splayed in his stiff feet. But the little circle, the pit in its center where the badger had "dug in," the red trail from it back down the path to Vol's den—they were covered by this peaceful blanket. Here in the circle Vol's wounded legs and shoulders and jaws had wept blood as the dog had fought round and round



the bar-faced demon who squatted in the shallow pit at the circle's hub and ripped and tore with teeth and claws. Ripped and tore, that is, until the dog's fangs finally sank home.

Now he stood in the snow, his back to the drift covering the vanquished one and looked down Willow Creek Valley—his valley—as it shimmered and glared beneath the early afternoon sun, with purple shadows running along the drifts like pools of phantom water among summer hills. For a moment he was carried back to afternoons, long ago, months ago, beside Buck and Juno on some hill, watching the sheep in the valley while Herder Louie drowsed in the shade of his parasol, and softly cursed the flies in his sleep. Buck and Juno and Camp Number Seven—

A twitch in his belly brought Vol back to that stark, blinding whiteness, to Willow Creek Valley, to his insistent hunger. And without even a glance at the mound he had first inspected, the dog turned north, skirting the rim of the bluff that bounded his valley on the west.

On the level up here the snow lay to the dog's belly, and a stiff wind from the northeast had drifted it all the previous night as it fell, so that as he plunged along Vol was forced to choose a path between the drifts, where he could wallow through. It was still loose, however, up here where the wind swept it. Although that wind bit deep into his aching legs and chest and drove

hard, frozen pellets into his fevered eyes, the dog made good progress.

But to-day there were no rabbits out. Though the sun shone brilliantly the wind was so strong and the snow so deep and shifting that all the smaller animals knew the cheer and wisdom of snug nests well down beneath the ground.

## 2

HALF a mile down the valley rim until the sharp bluff gave way to a more gradual hillside, the dog pushed his way, halting every few yards to ease his aching legs and to grasp huge mouthfuls of breath.

Then he came to one of his favorite trails leading to the valley floor and a big waterhole there. It was more difficult going downhill, for his front legs had now begun to bleed and the snow cut them painfully. Besides, the tall grass of the valley held great drifts, higher twice over than the dog's back. So he skirted the hillside, where the wind had kept clear a shallow path. The wind down here now, he found, was broken into little gusts by the jutting points of land that poked out from the sharp hillsides.

Once he caught a rabbit scent from the hillside near him, but the wind was so gusty that he lost it almost at once and had to scurry around to find it. When he finally did recapture it behind a creosote bush that the wind had left free of snow, Vol was on the wrong side, so that his scent was blown directly toward it. He saw

a fat old cottontail only as it disappeared, dropping into its burrow like a clod tumbling over a cliff. The dog leaped stiffly to the hole, gleaming black in the midst of so much white, and whined and thrust his nose in to sniff eagerly. Then he made a few futile passes at it with his aching paws, half in a notion to dig for a meal. But with a discouraged whimper he gave it up and turned to look out over the valley. His legs ached as he stood on them now, and in his chest were tuggings and shootings of pain that made him twitch all over.

A hundred paces up the valley, toward his den, lay a drift that reached nearly across from hill to hill, rolled up as though heaped over a wire fence backed with tumbleweeds. There, the dog knew, was a wind-row of Russian thistles growing in a strip of ground that five or ten years before had been crudely plowed for a range boundary mark. In those seed-laden thistles the dog had often flushed Whirr Wing, the quail, and Bar-Tail, the prairie chicken. He saw the long drift now, remembered feathered catches.

As a rule, quail desert the valleys of those plains by October, but occasionally a covey of the birds will continue on, feeding in the weed thickets until the first and even the second snow, in the drifts of which they huddle together in peace and warmth and—usually—in safety.

As Vol now limped toward the white ridge he left behind him a trail tinged with red. Each new contact

of his forelegs with the snow left a stain from the rapidly reopening wounds.

At the near end of the drift the snow was close-packed and frozen, so that the dog was borne upon its surface. Like a tawny cat he crawled along. Slowly he worked his way toward the center of the white ridge, where the weeds grew closest and where the birds, if there at all, would surely be. The drift as it grew deeper grew less able to bear his weight. One foot poked through the crust. Instantly the dog dropped to his belly. Now he crept forward even more cautiously. Then, two paces ahead—one pace! He plunged in as he would have gone into tall grass where he knew a litter of young rabbits was hidden. He crushed down through the thin top snow and bore the frail framework of the dead thistles to the ground in a blow. There beneath the snow crust he slashed right and left, eyes almost closed, heeding no pain of wounds or sharp scratches on sensitive flesh, for with the first plunge one foot had come down on the feathered back of a quail. The excited clitter of the frightened birds seemed to surround him.

Then there was a thrumming whirr. A cloud of fine snow floated back from the upper air and all was cold and quiet. The throbbing, dark bodies of the remainder of the quail covey shone for an instant against the white of the hillside. Then they disappeared around the bend in the valley. For a moment Vol stood there looking up at the blue sky. The sifting snow still floated back

from the beating wings and fell into his eyes with pleasant coolness. Then he nosed aside a big thistle, lay down beneath the edge of the drift, and ate.

Vol ate two of the birds and could have eaten a third, but the pains in his chest and shoulders had begun to clamp on his jaws. So he picked up the other two of his catch, wallowed out to the edge of the valley and pushed back toward his den, now very stiff and very sore. So knotted and painful had his muscles become, in fact, that he could scarcely climb the path to his ledge, and once there he dropped the birds at his doorway and crept inside.

Then he slept.

Until he awakened the sun continued to shine, but by the time he had again soothed his forelegs with his tongue and softened the matted fur on his shoulders, the shadows of dusk had come. Then he gingerly crept outside.

Down across the valley everything was peaceful. He seemed to have been the only valley person to venture out this day, for despite the sun in that deep, ice sky, there was an uneasy feeling in the air of this white-clad world—a hint of impending calamity, a breath of intangible danger. Not snow alone and not cold. The breath of a blizzard hesitating for a new wind, perhaps, or the odorless scent of an icy impasse.

The shadows had turned from blue and violet to deep purple and black and now the valley floor was a mass of thick darkness, with a ghostly wall rising where

Vol knew the opposite cliff to be. But the sun had shone warm for hours, despite the wind, and now the drifts were settled and over their tops lay a coating of damp, almost slushy snow.

Vol gulped down several rich mouthfuls of this slush then lifted one of his birds from the dooryard, and returned to his warm nest where he ate at great length and with extreme fastidiousness, for he was at home, he was not very hungry, and he merely wanted to dawdle over his food. Having eaten, Vol again licked his legs and shoulders, yawned, looked out into the dark world, and then curled up to sleep. Even as he was dozing off he heard the whine of the rising wind as it whipped along the bluffs and down the deep-cut valley.

Before midnight the dog roused and poked his nose more completely beneath the bushy tip of his tail.

## 3

NEXT morning it was not the glare of sun or snow or the steady drip of streams trickling down over his doorway that wakened the dog. It was the whine of the wind.

All night it had raged, the temperature dropping as steadily as a setting sun, and just before dawn the cold reached and held a mark so low that Vol hesitated about uncurling, a few hours later, to sniff the new day. Finally he lifted his head and looked outside. Then he



shivered, lay back and closed his eyes and forgot the world for another hour.

The dim glow of the hidden sun was almost overhead before the dog finally ventured forth. His forelegs were now so stiff that he merely hobbled, and he wasted no effort, either, in trotting up the hill to look or down the hill to drink—the waterhole was frozen tight anyway. Vol saw all he cared to see from his narrow dooryard, and to slake his thirst he scraped a few crystals from the frozen drifts.

Then he looked for the fourth quail, the one he had left in the snow yesterday while the sun was softening the drifts. Now he found only a hole where the bird had been, and at the bottom, frozen tight in the ice there, a bunch of feathers. The dog reached down and tugged, tugged until his sore shoulders ached. But the fickle sun had buried his meal, then sealed it in. So he crept back into his den with a few strings of frozen quail flesh between his teeth and many quail feathers scattered about the dooryard.

All afternoon the dog lay shivering in his burrow, his forelegs and shoulders too painful to allow more than fitful rest, and that night he slept little. He was not warm, and no dog can rest chilled to the bone. The wind outside had reached mid-winter strength and carried cold that froze the icy drifts deeper and deeper. And inside Vol the usual fire of warmth that helped ward off such weather was burning low. In summer he could go without food for several days and not suffer,



if he were in good physical condition. But in winter, when such winds as this swept the plains, Vol needed a well-filled belly as well as a shaggy coat, especially when such a drain as his present injuries sapped his vitality. So this night he roused and shifted about his den several times, dimly believing that the snow must be drifting deeply into his den, so cold and miserable he felt. Worst of all, his forelegs and chest were pulling and twitching beneath their torn skin. Often he lay drowsing while his unthinking tongue soothed and warmed the aching, burning flesh.

But when the thick murk of night had gone, a dusk even of day remained, and instead of going forth into a gleaming world again Vol slid into a land of awful unconsciousness too horrible to be called sleep, for there the dog must have wandered among hot, yellow flames, badgers big as bulls and cactus thorns tall as yucca spikes.

Another midday came before Vol crept from his den to stare at the white cliff across the way. It was stiff and painful movement, that crawling out, and he promptly sat down on the snowdrift at his doorway, for this morning it bore his weight. The slush of two days ago had become a crust of ice that flowed everywhere, over everything; hard, glaring, cruel.

The dog gnawed at the snow and greedily swallowed the few crystals he scraped loose. Then he looked for a remnant of the quail. But this morning it was frozen even tighter than before, and the struggle he made to

get a meager mouthful aggravated his hunger more than that mouthful assuaged it.

That night the dog's tail felt as scraggly as a sagebrush, for it kept neither nose nor feet warm. To the ache in his lacerated legs there was now added the gnawing pain beneath his ribs.

When Vol again crawled from his hole in the cliff, a new sun was gleaming. No murk veiled its light. And as the dog stumbled along the cliff, eyes like red-rimmed waterholes, the warmth of the light made his gaunt body shiver. For an hour he staggered about aimlessly. Then he crouched on the icy flat and lay there while he licked his wounds, long, carefully. Each hair was laid in place, each gash properly cleansed.

As he raised his head from the task Vol's eyes were no longer wild and frantic. The warmth of the sun had penetrated his rough coat, penetrated his thick skin, his flesh, his bones; he was warm again—warm and hungry and rational.

Now his feet moved methodically, if uncertainly, and he steadily worked west, his shadow stalking far ahead of him. But when not even a bird flew up from the vast, white waste he turned south. He halted on the rim of a bluff and looked down into a hollow totally strange to him. He was fifteen or perhaps twenty miles south of the place where he lived, fully ten miles beyond his usual range, for during his Willow Creek residence he had hunted north and west from his den.

As he stood there blinking down at the unfamiliar

valley the pangs from his empty belly pulling at his very brain and the dull ache of the poison in his wounded legs still burning at his eyes, the dog lifted his ears in attention. A haunting "ee-ee-ee-eeek" monotonously regular, scratching at the white silence like a sharp claw ripping into brittle ice, came from somewhere below.

Almost at once the dog found a path down the hillside toward the valley floor. Then, still seeking the source of the sound, he rounded a sharp twist in the valley.

There, nestled close beneath a high bluff, stood a tiny house on wheels, snow-covered and icicle hung. Beside it, sheltered from the wind by the bluff itself, rambled a series of sheep pens, several panels of the fencing down and all vacant, though evidently unused only a short time. And there in the middle of the hollow, squeaking monotonously, stood the battered windmill Vol had heard, its galvanized tanks nearly buried beneath the drifts and its wheel spinning aimlessly as though its long pump rod were broken.

No smoke came from the shack. The drifts were untouched by claw or hoof. Evidently the herder had foreseen this early blizzard and had moved his flock to the larger camp, probably not far away, where they could be fed until the thaws came.

## 4

WHEN he had assured himself that the camp was deserted, Vol went closer. It was almost half a year since he had seen a sheep camp; half a year since he had fled from Dutch John in Camp Number Seven fifty miles to the northeast. Half a year since he had revolted at Dutch John's abuse, had fought back, then had fled.

Yet now the dog sniffed eagerly at the wheels beneath the house, at the little ladder leading up to its door, at the corners of the sheep pens, seeking signs of the latest visitors. Coyotes, he found, had been there in plenty; and perhaps two weeks ago there had been dogs, but neither Buck nor Juno had been among those. This was well beyond Jim Bloom's sheep range.

Then Vol trotted around the pens until he found an opening. He entered and sniffed eagerly at the boards. Several splinters held strands of dirty, smelly wool, and in the corners were the hard-packed black sheep leavings.

At the far end was a great drift, high as the fence itself, where the wind had swirled the snow in freakish fashion. The dog looked at it, took another step, looked again. From behind it rose tiny puffs, like thin gray smoke.

Vol watched a minute. Then he circled closer. Finally he climbed the drift to its top. There he mo-

mentarily drew back, stiffened, then pointed his ears and wagged his tail excitedly.

There was a little cry and a quick tapping, as of tiny, hard feet on frozen ground. Then one weak little "baa-a-a-a!"

Vol barked. One ecstatic yelp of dog joy!

Then he recoiled—frightened. It was the first bark he had uttered in six months. The first real dog sound in half a year! He recoiled from his own voice, the voice of Vol, the sheep dog, the son of a collie mother, glad at the sight of sheep.

For behind the drift, penned in the corner of the corral by the snow, stood an old ewe and two lambs of perhaps five months. She had lambed out of season and probably was sick when the herd moved, so was left to the coyotes. But somehow she had lived, recovered from her sickness and now was penned by the snow and facing death by starvation.

The dog looked down at the old ewe. How easy it would be to drop down into the little snow prison, slash quickly and fill his empty belly. How easy! Just as a wolf or a coyote would do.

His hunger tore at his brain. His wounded legs ached. And as he stood there his big brown eyes grew hard, glinting. His lips parted, showing his fangs.

He edged closer to the helpless prisoners, bunched his muscles for the spring.

Then came the echo of his joyous yelp. His dog cry. The sound distinctive of his tribe, of his mother's tribe.

A sound echoing clear back to the glens of Scotland. No coyote ever had barked that way, nor any wolf, not even Vol's own ancestor. None ever would. Vol was a dog, after all.

He turned away, trotted down the snow bank to the edge of the corral.

But there he halted. A gust of wind again brought that hot, meaty smell to his nose. Food! And the dog was starving. He was maimed. The cruel whiteness was killing him. And the urge to live was powerful, overwhelming.

The first law of the world is life. Vol had come close to death. Now he stood twenty feet from warm, life-giving flesh. He turned back toward the woolly prisoners.

Again he mounted the drift, and again the old ewe faced him, her two youngsters at her side. Eagerly she looked up. Her dull eyes lighted. She even blatted weakly again; friendly little sounds like greetings between comrades.

But when the dog's muscles bunched anew for the fatal spring he met her eyes and hesitated. Then he shifted his position and waited. There was confidence in those eyes, the confidence that glows in the newly opened eyes of a puppy safe at his mother's dugs.

Vol turned away a moment. Behind him the windmill still screeched. A cold gust from up the valley whipped at his coat, stung his skin. And the sun on the snow seemed now to have terrible, stinging bright-



ness. His eyes watered, suddenly became sightless. The world wheeled and dipped, and the dog stood alone in the midst of a terrible plain of icy whiteness where fierce, hot claws reached up from all sides and tore at him—ripped his legs, his throat, his eyes, grasped at his mouth, choked him!

The dog blinked, opened his eyes. All about him was whiteness and stinging wind. The mill still squeaked. And in his middle that awful pain of hunger was more gnawing than ever.

His eyes glinted. His lips drew back from his fangs. His sore feet splayed in eagerness. No longer was Vol a dog, son of a collie mother. He was a wild beast battling for his life, in the wild, of the wild. He would eat, live.

With a snarl he turned toward the prisoners. In a leap he was beside them in the little prison. His teeth were set for the kill. The old ewe would leap from him in terror, like a fleeing jack rabbit, and he would pull her down, eat, live.

Then he hesitated. His snarl died in his throat. His eager tail drooped, almost crept between his legs. For the ewe did not leap in fright. She blatted weakly, almost happily. And she held out her nose toward him, edged closer, touched him. "A friend," her actions said. "You can save us."

Vol's eyes softened, his head drooped wearily. Then in one fierce leap he had cleared the snow barrier and was loping away. He seemed to see nothing. He panted



as though he had run for miles. He quivered. Yet he loped steadily on, down the valley. And as he loped, in his ears echoed that eager dog yelp of joy, that sound which no wild dog ever uttered.

## 5

A MILE from the camp he slowed down. It was easier going, for the warm sun had helped the persistent exercise to loosen the dog's aching muscles. And his eyes were no longer red with fever. They were rational eyes again. When he flushed a jack rabbit half a mile further on he was off to so good a start that had the Long-Eared One kept to the valley the dog would have broken his long fast. But the rabbit knew where lay his safety and fled up the steepest hillside, leaving Vol far behind.

Listlessly the dog continued down the valley. Another night would come, another tearing, searing nightmare of hunger and pain. Then another day—and were he still able to run perhaps he would find food. The rabbits had been icebound three days now. They must come out soon.

Mile after mile was left behind, until he came to familiar landmarks. He had caught a cottontail under that bank, had chased Mephisto, the skunk, up that gully, had eaten many Long-Eared Ones in this hollow. His private waterhole and his den were only a few miles ahead.

Then a gray-white flash shot out from beneath his nose, and the dog lost another jack rabbit in a hillside dash. Twenty yards and another leaped. And in a wink it seemed the whole valley was overrun with rabbits. The afternoon of blazing sun had brought them out to feed after their long fast. And that same sun had played traitor in its efforts to serve. For as the dog came within a mile of his den the crust began to crumble beneath his feet. Fifty yards and he saw it crumble beneath a Long-Eared One. Seventy-five yards and it crumbled beneath a rabbit just as it leaped to escape the dog.

Long legs and powerful sinews won there in the sun-rotted snow. The dog ate. In his daze it was like some wonderful gift, this flood of rabbits and this treacherous crust which trapped them for him. But without questioning he ate. Then in the dusk he climbed to his den, an untouched carcass in his jaws, and slept as he had not slept in a week.

## 6

Six days the thaw lasted, until every tuft of grass in the valley poked up through the remaining scum of white. The dog's fever was gone, and the hair on his legs strove to cover scars that no longer drew and twitched and wakened him at night with their pain.

On the seventh day Vol swung up the valley.

Mile after mile he left behind him, until he again heard that "ee-ee-ee-eek, ee-ee-ee-eek," slowly, monotonously regular, from around the next bend. Then

he saw the little house on wheels and sniffed at the windmill tower. Only an icy heap remained of the great snowdrift in the deserted pens, a heap not even as high as the dog.

Slowly he approached and looked beyond.

There lay a black triangle, bounded on two sides by the fence and on the third by what remained of the drift—a black triangle of ground beaten hard by the little hoofs of sheep. But there were no heaps of dirty wool, wet and smelly and sodden. No black-nosed carcasses. Only the black triangle, and not even a bone. He went closer and sniffed. No trace of blood.

Then he went outside and circled the pens. Alongside the corral, close by the corner where the ewe and her off-season lambs had been prisoned, were two hard, shiny tracks standing above the scum as do those spots after a thaw where the snow has been hard packed, as by wagon wheels or sled runners. And with those lines were round spots, like horses' hoofs, and oval spots, like men's boot soles. Far away, over the hill to the south, they led, as a man with a wagon and a team would have gone.

As he paused at the windmill to leave his mark again, it seemed the dog heard an echo, a sharp, excited yap of dog joy—an echo in his head. Then he turned down the valley toward his den. And in a vague way Vol realized that men never bother to haul dead sheep away from deserted pens.

CHAPTER VI  
BLACK-TAIL







## CHAPTER VI

### BLACK-TAIL

#### I

IT WAS late in February before the Willow Creek jack rabbits became so scarce that Vol had to look elsewhere for the bulk of his food. For a time he hunted the flats to the west, roaming as far as the edge of that blue ridge of foothills twenty-five miles away. Then early in March, when the snow had vanished from all but the deep-shadowed hollows though the air was distinctly sharp, a scimitar of a moon lured the dog out on a night when some inner curiosity turned his nose toward the north. Down the valley he traveled.

He passed Moon Lake, now an ice sheet long and

slender and gleaming. He passed the next waterhole, where three cotton-woods stood in the faint light like gaunt figures stretching naked arms toward the stars. And five miles further downstream he came to a cabin tucked under a cliff. He sensed it from a distance and was cautious. Going closer he caught the man-scent, and although his instinct told him to avoid the place he was drawn to it by his curiosity. There was no light, nor any smoke. But the man-scent was fresh. And when he got still closer there were many other odors that made his nose wrinkle in wonder and the shoulder hair rise in instinctive anger. They were the odors of badger and coyote.

For nearly an hour Vol hovered near the place, puzzled. At last he went up to the cabin itself, from a back way. The man was inside, asleep at this time of night. But there was about the place that acrid scent that came when Dutch John fired his gun. This man, too, must have a gun that could make one stumble and fall a long way off and leave an ugly wound without even touching one. Then Vol found the source of another scent that had baffled him. It came from a cluster of steel things that hung by chains from a peg in the side of the cabin. It was a strange scent, of metal and man and badger, skunk and coyote, all mixed up together. And at last Vol found why he had smelled badger and coyote so strongly. Stretched on frames hung high on one end of the cabin were skins that reeked of those scents. Only skins. But somehow the dog understood that the



man had something ominous to do with the separation of those skins from their owners.

He paused at the corner of the cabin long enough to leave his sign and proof of his contempt. Then he turned and picked his way carefully back over the path by which he had approached. He knew that was safe, and something inside told him this place was not altogether without danger for an unwary creature.

Then he continued down the valley.

The sickle of a moon had set and Vol had come to the place where Willow Creek no longer lay in occasional pools but instead flowed in a steady stream, before he found food. Then he caught two rabbits within an hour. Gorged, he traveled only a little way further before he found a willow clump underlaid with dry grass and leaves. There he curled up and slept.

The sun was overhead before he left the willows.

Throughout the afternoon he continued down the valley at leisure, occasionally finding traces of range cattle and once crossing the trail of a horse evidently ridden by a man. It went straight about its business and did not wander about at will as a horse would if it were free to graze. Then late in the afternoon Vol found a new scent and new tracks. The scent was like nothing else he had known. It was warm and meaty and enticing. The tracks were like those of sheep, except that they were larger and further apart. Their maker, then, was bigger than sheep. This animal had fed on grass

for a time, then it had gone to a clump of willows and eaten the tender twigs already swelling with bud.

Vol followed the tracks, out of curiosity.

Just before sunset the trail led him out onto a tableland, a spur of flat hills around which the creek lazied its crooked way. The scent was fresh now, so fresh the animal odor lingered for the dog's nose in the grass. He knew he was close to this stranger, and because the wind was in his face Vol knew he would be very close before the stranger took flight. Down over the far side of the hill he went, down toward the brushy valley below. And there in the edge of the brush the scent became so strong the dog forgot the tracks. He entered the nearest willows.

There was a snort, a crash of brush, the light thud of hoofbeats. Vol sped after the sounds. Half across the valley he saw a dark body ahead of him, going through the higher brush like a range cow, leaping completely over the lower brush as easily as a jack rabbit over bunch grass. It was a beautiful creature, more than twice as high as Vol, and its head carried strange horns, horns that branched like trees. It was a black-tailed or mule deer.

## 2

VOL had seen the dainty prong-horn antelopes out on the flats. He knew their marvelous speed and grace. This stranger of the brushlands was more like those antelopes than anything else the dog had ever seen.

But he knew Flash-Tail, the antelope, could never have soared so easily through and over that brush as this creature, this Black-Tail. He followed, and he saw the deer clear Willow Creek in one beautiful leap, then go sailing up the far hillside, top the ridge against the flaming sky and vanish.

The dog had paused at the stream to watch. Now he found a narrow place, crossed and followed the deer's tracks up the hillside. After all, Black-Tail was not such a different runner from Long Ears, the jack rabbit. He was bigger and stronger, and he could run farther, no doubt. He could lead the way through much worse going than Long Ears. But he could be brought down, and once captured he would make more meals than a dozen jack rabbits. The dog had come down the valley in search of food.

Vol halted near the brow of the hill, sniffed those tracks again. The sun had set now, and already the moon was showing in the eastern sky. It was a night for a hunt. Vol swung into a long, easy lope, crossed the hill and plunged into the valley below.

For an hour he followed the tracks, which held to the lower hillsides most of the way. Now they had slowed up, and the dog knew he must be getting closer again. He became more cautious. Black-Tail's trail led into the brush once more, and this time when Vol found the scent clearly warm he skirted the willows instead of plunging directly in. But again his strategy was wrong. While he went around one big clump, trying

to get the wind, he heard a soft movement behind him, then the quick patter of hoofs. He spun around to see Black-Tail sailing back up the valley. The deer had doubled back on its tracks so that the dog passed it in hiding, thus giving Black-Tail a chance to get away.

And again Vol took up the trail of flight, this time, however, not halting when the deer crossed the stream, not waiting when the deer plunged into thick brush, not even pausing when the deer sped over a spur of hills full two hundred yards ahead. This time Vol swung into a long, easy lope that carried him over much ground with a minimum of effort, and he clung to the trail like a cocklebur to a dog's hair in autumn.

And this time Black-Tail ran only about half as far before he again turned back to the valley and the sheltering willows.

Once more Vol skirted the brush, now watching against that doubling back that had baffled him before. His cunning was worth the effort. For when Black-Tail crashed away from his hiding place he ran straight-away, with Vol only ten yards behind. But still the dog did not press the chase. He sensed that the deer was tiring. Before it had had a good rest between runs. This time it had only a few minutes, scarcely time to blow, not enough time to let the pounding heart slacken pace. All this Vol sensed in the fact that Black-Tail now traveled around even the lower brush instead of leaping lightly over. And that, too, added to the dog's advantage, for Vol had to travel around, and now he dropped

little behind as the deer headed once more for the open hills.

Vol was less than fifteen yards behind when Black-Tail charged up the hillside toward the west. That hillside was steep. It was hard going for the dog. But it was even harder going for the deer. Downhill he could travel like the wind, but uphill he held no such advantage over Vol as did a jack rabbit. Vol steadily closed in, and had the hill been another hundred yards long Vol would have been alongside those heaving ribs before they reached the top. Instead, he was five yards behind when the two of them swept out into the open on the tableland.

Out across the gently rolling upland the two of them sped, the only sounds the slight click of the deer's hoofs and the whistle of his breath, deep-drawn and coming fast. Vol dogged Black-Tail's heels almost shadow-like, silent as the moon itself, now running at top speed. He was indeed a son of his father now, wolfhound and wolf coursing game worthy of his strength and endurance. His tongue lolled out, his eyes glittered, his ears lay back, his tail streamed straight behind and his legs whipped along the ground with the steady rhythm of an autumn rain.

Soon Black-Tail began to swerve back toward the right, at first so slightly that Vol scarcely knew it, then more openly working around toward Willow Creek with its brush and its havens. The dog altered his course slightly, bore even more to the right and took the inner

arc of the circle. A few hundred yards and Vol was no longer at the deer's heels but alongside, on the animal's right. That magnificent antlered head swerved, Black-Tail saw what had happened and he bore to the left once more, away from the valley. Out onto the flats again they sped, now paralleling Willow Creek's course. It was a straightaway race once more.

But not for long. Black-Tail's sides were heaving and his tongue, too, was lolling out. He must somehow get back to that watercourse and all its advantages to his way of flight.

## 3

THRICE the deer tried desperately to turn back, twice to his left and once to his right. And each time the dog blocked the move by cutting across the circle Black-Tail tried to make. Then Black-Tail stumbled, went almost to his knees. Vol was at his side, now, trying to get close enough to make that leap which would end it. When Black-Tail faltered, however, the dog was caught off-guard. His momentum carried him beyond before he could leap in. By the time he had recovered he had lost five yards, and Black-Tail was speeding back whence they had come, bearing steadily to his left again, over toward the brow of the hill and the valley below.

Again Vol cut across the circle and headed the deer. Then Black-Tail seemed to give up all hopes of regaining Willow Creek and its help. Straightaway into



the west he ran, so straight that Vol could see the moon, there near the horizon, glowing over the deer's left shoulder. Black-Tail swerved not an inch to either side, but only sped on and on, running as he had not run before this night. He led the way down a long, gentle slope and he gained perhaps two yards. On the slight upgrade beyond, Vol regained half that much. Then they were on the flat again, and neither dog nor deer could gain. Black-Tail was near the end of his gallant endurance. But the dog, too, was tiring.

One last magnificent spurt and Black-Tail noticeably faltered. That last spurt had carried him fully five yards ahead. But now Vol closed in with less than a dozen leaps. The deer had slowed down to little better than a trot. Vol came on, loped alongside, poised a moment in mid-stride, leaped. But as he leaped, the deer swerved. Vol's teeth missed their mark by an inch. And as he came back he faced those branching antlers, lowered, now, and menacing.

The race was over. Vol had won. But the kill was yet to be made. Black-Tail had halted and stood there, eyes bulging, mouth open in distress and sides heaving. His legs were spread wide and his dark body gleamed as he stood there trembling in the last glow of the moon.

Vol circled about, watching for an opening. But each way he turned, those forked antlers faced him. He fainted. The deer half lunged at him. He leaped aside. But before he could get in that one blow, Black-Tail



had swung his threatening head around once more. He was weary now, almost drooping. But he was fighting to the end.

Had he been a wolf, Vol would have charged quickly past, doubled back and hamstrung the beast. But Vol was not quite a wolf. He still dared the best Black-Tail could give. He kept threatening that throat which those antlers guarded. Once he feinted too close, and Black-Tail's charge was quicker than usual, desperate. Vol felt the thrust of the antlers and was half thrown off his feet. But before Black-Tail could follow up the momentary advantage the dog was in the clear once more.

For half an hour they sparred thus, Vol still unable to finish the chase in his own fashion. But all the while Black-Tail was regaining his wind. His tongue no longer lolled out. His eyes were no longer glassy with exhaustion. And when the full darkness came after moonset, Black-Tail's lunges became more and more accurately timed and noticeably more vigorous. At last, when one of these fresh charges had driven the dog some distance to one side, the deer spun around and sped away, straight back toward Willow Creek. Vol was ten yards behind.

But Vol, too, had been regaining strength of limb and ease of lungs. More than that, he had cornered his quarry here, had almost brought it down. He would not be done out of it so easily. He ran now as he had not run in months.

Again he came alongside, on the far side of that same hollow they had crossed an hour before. This time he neither parried nor delayed. He had learned what those antlers could do when Black-Tail was cornered. He had learned how quickly Black-Tail could swerve to one side. He had learned where his best chance lay.

He raced perhaps a hundred yards at the deer's shoulder. Black-Tail bore slightly to the right. Vol sped a little ahead, a little further to the left. Suddenly his thrumming haunches launched him into mid-air. This time there was no question about his aim. There was no chance of those antlers coming into play. This time Vol struck home. Black-Tail's knees faltered. His haunches rose high. His whole body came crashing down.

The chase was ended.

## 4

For two days Vol remained out there on the flats, resting, gorging himself, driving the coyotes away from his hard-won meat. And in the evening of the third day he left to the skulking coyotes what remained of his major kill. He returned to Willow Creek Valley, there to sleep in a grass nest among the willows.

A week after he had left his den, Vol started back toward familiar country. A light, late snow had fallen and the sky promised more before another day had passed. Mile after mile the dog skirted the valley at

the edge of the uplands, just below the brink of the hills, where he would never be silhouetted against the skyline. Shortly after midday he passed the spot where that mysterious cabin nestled against the bluff. And again he saw no sign of human life around it. But half a mile further on he came on the man-scent. A faint trail in the snow led across the valley from the cabin, up the hillside where Vol was traveling and out onto the flats beyond.

The dog nosed the tracks warily. They stirred memories of that metallic odor from the traps he had seen hanging on the cabin, memories of that acrid, burned-powder smell which came from the gun Dutch John used to carry. Vol sniffed them again and went on, watching the skyline apprehensively. But a hundred yards away he paused, waited several minutes, then went back to those tracks. After this second inspection he swung up the hillside, following the man-tracks.

For half a mile he followed them, not knowing quite why. Then he came to a place where the man had stopped, and beside the tracks he found a little brass cylinder that reeked with that gun-smell. Again he paused, and again he turned away from the trail and started south, toward his den off there in the canyons. This time he did not turn back. But, for some unexplainable reason, neither did he veer back toward Willow Creek. Instead, he swung still further out onto the flats.

For several miles he continued on that course. Then

he topped a gentle rise and, looking down into the swale below, saw something move. He watched. That something was a badger.

At first Vol went his way. Badgers in this part of the country did not interest him. But as he traveled he kept one eye on the Scar-Faced One down there. The badger did not move about naturally. Nor did it crouch there as though it were merely waiting at the mouth of its den. Nor yet did it seem to be feeding. Finally Vol swerved down the hill to look closer.

As he approached this Scar-Faced One he saw that it had snow matted in its hair. It must have been there, then, since early the night before. And when it did move, it circled around one forefoot, as though that paw were held fast.

Now Vol went up within twenty feet of the badger. It was in the worst possible temper, and it hissed and snapped its teeth at him even from there. Then as it lunged about in new frenzy the dog saw a steel something fastened to that forepaw, and a chain from it to a stake. That steel something was the same as Vol had seen hanging on the side of the cabin beneath the bluff. Scar Face was in trouble, and the man, then, was the one who had made the trouble. Vol sniffed and caught a faint man-scent, faint perhaps because the snow had fallen since he was there. Vol moved closer, started to circle the badger, to learn more about this.

Scarcely had he taken a dozen steps when his sensitive pads felt something wrong. Almost before their

warning reached his brain, Vol leaped back, so quick were his reactions and so keenly keyed were his nerves. Lightning-fast, but not quite fast enough. Sharp jaws leaped from the snow beneath him and caught at his left forepaw. They closed on one toe with numbing pain.

The dog leaped about in a frenzy. Those steel jaws, too, were anchored to a stake by a chain. Vol was trapped.

Twice he jerked back, and each time that chain snubbed him short. The pain from that paw darted up his leg and stabbed at his entire shoulder. He was frantic.

Then something shattered the silence. *Crack!* Out of the corner of his eye Vol saw a man-person standing there on the hillside, a smoking gun in his hand. And Vol felt a stinging pain across his shoulders. Memories flashed through his brain. Dutch John! Camp Number Seven! Gunfire! The pain in his paw was forgotten. The chain in the snow was forgotten. Vol leaped back with all his strength. There was one sickening thrust of pain, a jerk, a stumbling lurch backward. Vol was free.

There was another of those echoing crashes of thunder from the gun on the hillside, a splattering of snow in the dog's face. Then he was gone. Vol ran as no dog ever ran, up out of the hollow, over the hill, away across the flats, and he ran those first few hundred yards as a kit-fox runs, zigzagging, making no target at all

for a man with a gun. For those memories of Dutch John still flared through the dog's brain.

Vol ran fully a mile before he began to limp, and after that he kept to the hollows and the sheltered valleys all the way to his own den in the bluffs away to the south. That night he licked that maimed left forepaw a long time while strange visions came into his memory. But none of those visions could have pictured the trapper as he sat in his cabin beneath the bluff that same night and tried to puzzle out how an off-color wolf could have left one toe in his nest of coyote traps—the same nest that had caught him a prime badger skin—and gotten clean away, not only from the trap but from the hunter himself although he fired five shots at the beast from less than seventy yards.





CHAPTER VII  
PRONG-HORN







## CHAPTER VII PRONG-HORN

### I

**S**PRING came so gradually that the folk of Willow Creek Valley scarcely knew when winter ended. A snow came late in March, much the same sort of snow as had fallen in December or February. For a week it lay on the ground, but those who went abroad to mar its smooth whiteness found the air not so sharp as after earlier snows. Then one night a wind came in from the southwest. Long before dawn there was the soft, musical tinkle of little streams running down the hillsides. By noon the next day there was an icy-clear brook flowing down each little hollow, and the snow had vanished. The spring came, on a southwest wind.

There was no more snow. A week later the south-sloping hillsides showed green through the matt of

autumn brown. And before any one knew quite what had happened, the meadowlarks were in the valleys once more, whistling their morning songs that sound amazingly like the words, "I'm here again!"

Vol had come through the winter surprisingly well, considering what had happened to him. His body was scarred but hard as flint, strong as rawhide. He was keen of wits as a coyote, fearless as a badger, fast as a deer, wise as a burrowing owl. He was experienced as only a creature that has battled the wild can be experienced. Yet he had memories such as few creatures of the wild ever have. Those memories returned to him often in this time of new grass, returning birds and warm sunlight.

This would be lambing season back in the sheep camps, long days and hard nights for herders and dogs, days and nights when an hour's neglect might cost the lives of a dozen woolly, new-born lambs. They were days and nights filled from end to end with frantic blating, mothers for their babies, babies for their mothers, all swelling the din that some said made sheep herders a bit daft. Then followed long, hard days of handling the herd with all those newcomers, none of them yet wise in the ways of the world or schooled in the ways of well-behaved sheep. Lambs would stray off. Ewes would follow anxiously. In a twinkling the whole herd would be scattering. No herder in the world could handle such a flock single-handed. And every herder worth his salt thanked his stars when he had well-trained,

gentle dogs to help when the lambs were first taken out onto the hills with the flock.

Memories of such days came often to Vol as he lay on his ledge and watched the springtime come creeping across the plains. That is perhaps the chief reason Vol was so much interested in the Flash-Tails when they came to the flats just east of his valley.

Vol had been chasing a jack rabbit. The Long-Eared One was wise in his own fashion, and when the dog raced dangerously close, down in the valley where the chase had begun, Long Ears veered to the right, shot up the steep hillside and saved his life. Vol followed, losing ground every jump but persistent to the end. When he reached the rim, the dog was twenty yards behind the rabbit. And Long Ears was heading straight east across the flats. Vol followed, a mile or more, but he was so winded by that steep climb out of the valley that he never got within striking distance and finally gave up. Once there, Vol remained on those flats for an hour or more.

He wandered well to the east and south, then turned back. He was within two miles of his den when he topped a slight rise and looked down into a broad, green swale. Not three hundred yards away stood three strangers, peacefully grazing.

Two of them were bigger than sheep, smaller than a mule deer. Both were brown and white in color, as though an undersized tan jacket had been laid over their white bodies, leaving white rumps, white bellies

and white chests. Both had dainty legs, thin almost to frailness. One wore strange horns that grew straight up from just above his eyes with a prong jutting forward on each horn a few inches above the base and the horn tips turned back. The third member of the group was no bigger than a month-old lamb, rich tan in color and long-eared as a baby deer.

Vol had found a prong-horn antelope family.

He watched for several minutes, only his head visible to the family in the hollow should they look his way. But even that head did not long remain unnoticed by the buck, the antelope with those strange horns. His eyes noted the unfamiliar sight on the hilltop. He snorted. The doe and her fawn obeyed instantly, moving nervously away. Vol remained motionless. He was watching that fawn, so lamb-like in its actions. The buck advanced several hesitant steps toward the dog. Then, finding no cause for further alarm, he turned and followed his mate and her fawn to the far side of the swale. But even there he stood watching instead of grazing. It was half an hour before his suspicions were quieted. But at last he, too, resumed his feeding, and soon the dog turned away, trotted back down out of sight and returned to his valley by a roundabout way.

## 2

IN the next few weeks Vol went often to those flats to watch these dainty folk. And after the first three visits

the old buck became sufficiently accustomed to the dog that he resumed his grazing after only a few minutes of first alarm. Vol took to lying on the hilltop, watching, and although the buck did not lead his family in the dazzling flight he might have, he did keep an anxious eye on this strange observer.

From that hilltop Vol watched the prong-horn fawn hide in the short grass for its midday nap, romp like any lamb in the cool of late afternoon or do its comical best to eat grass as its mother ate. But never did the dog overstep the limits of his position as merely tolerated observer, and never did the prong-horns relax their vigilance. This visitor had never yet been openly hostile, but instinct seemed to tell them never to trust any one so wolf-like as Vol. He could not make a move without the buck lifting his head in alarm and the doe and her fawn moving away toward some spot of more certain safety. And one afternoon when Vol got to his feet rather quicker than usual the little buck snorted in alarm, his big, white rump-patch bristled and all three of them went bounding across the flats at speed that would have made any jack rabbit envious. The prong-horns knew where their safety lay—in the speed of those dainty legs.

Then one day he approached them from a new direction. He went up a shallow gully that hid him almost entirely from the three prong-horns feeding in the swale ahead. Toward the end of the gully there was a cut-bank where summer rains had boiled down in a



waterfall and washed out a hole in the gully floor. Vol came to this cut-bank, which was perhaps three feet high. He climbed to a little ledge, thrust his head over the top and watched.

The prong-horns were not fifty yards away. The buck saw him, snorted, advanced a few steps as though in challenge. The dog remained motionless. The buck halted, and soon the doe and the fawn came to his side, big ears thrown forward and eyes all curiosity. They stood there fully a minute, watching. Then the fawn took a few steps toward this strange sight. It came still closer. The buck hung back, nervous, but the doe followed the fawn. The two of them came to within ten yards of the dog, quite overcome by their curiosity.

At last the dog leaped up into full sight, eyes glowing and collie dog once more from nose to tail-tip. He was ready for a romp with this lamb-creature.

But there was no romp that day. With his first movement they were off, all three of them, running like the wind and the white rump-patches of buck and doe gleaming in the sunlight like white flags. They might be the most inquisitive folk of the plains, but they never forgot their caution for all that. Frightened, they ran first and looked afterward.

It was more than a week later, and the early summer drought lay hot over the plains country, when Vol on his doorstep ledge saw two hawks circling high over the flats away there to the east. Then he saw a faint dust cloud off there, such a cloud as would have been

raised in this drought weather by two range horses traveling slowly across the flats. Vol felt a vague sense of uneasiness as he saw these things, but, after all, they did not concern him if they were away off there to the east. So he lay back and licked at a forepaw where a cactus thorn was threatening to fester. It took nearly an hour of slobbering over it to soften the pad and lure the thorn out where his teeth could get at it. By that time he was hot and thirsty, so he went down to the waterhole, drank, soaked himself and felt completely comfortable again. But after that he turned down the valley instead of returning to the den.

As usual, he jumped a jack rabbit. And, as usual after he had drunk heavily, Vol was slow on his feet. But he could still run, and he did run. The chase led down the valley, up the hillside and out onto the flats, very much as a similar chase had led more than a month earlier. And, just as that other time, Vol was out-distanced on the flats, gave up the chase and turned back toward the valley in a wide circle.

His tongue was lolling far out over his teeth and dripping a steady stream as he topped the second rise. But instantly that tongue was drawn in, Vol's head came up, his ears pricked and his body was all aquiver. Two hundred yards away, in the hollow, were his friends, the prong-horns. And over them hung that faint dust cloud he had seen from his ledge. They were not alone. Two coyotes were with them. And, strangest of all, the buck and the doe stood there facing the coy-

otes. They should have been skimming across the flats like a pair of birds, skimming away to easy safety.

Then Vol saw the fawn, a little way back of the older prong-horns. That little one, too, should be getting away from there at a speed equal to that of which his mother was capable.

There was a movement. One of the coyotes made a circling rush, trying to get at the fawn. But the little buck was quicker than the Long-Faced One. The buck seemed fairly to swoop at that oncoming coyote, swoop, then strike with his forefeet. He had small hoofs, smaller still than those of a sheep. But Vol, even from where he stood, could hear them thud into the coyote's ribs.

Even as that coyote turned and fled, however, the other circled toward the fawn from the other side. And this time the little doe was the protector. The second coyote's ribs resounded with the thud of tiny hoofs.

The two coyotes drew away, limping and panting. Evidently they had been at this attack for some time. Vol still could not understand why the prong-horns had not turned and run—why they did not turn and run now, for that matter. No coyote could keep anywhere near those beautiful creatures once they turned tail and gave their legs leaway. Even a three-months'-old fawn could leave a full grown coyote in the dust of the distance.

Then the dog heard a quavering blat, a cry of pain and fright, and he knew why the prong-horns stood

and fought. The fawn moved toward its mother, and as it moved it dragged one foot. It could not run. The buck and the doe would not desert it. For a matter of hours they had been fighting here. It must have been long, for the buck plainly showed blood on one shoulder and the doe drooped like a tired ewe.

## 3

So busy were those five actors in this plains drama that none of them had seen the dog approaching. Now he edged down the hillside toward them. Again the coyotes tried to get at the crippled fawn, and again the buck and the doe drove them off, this time, however, not without damage. One of the Long-Faced Ones dodged the doe's hoofs, leaped back, caught her off guard and ripped one of her frail legs. But she beat him off and sent him cringing. Had there been another coyote the tragedy would have been completed long before this. The buck would have been hamstrung, the fawn pulled down and very likely the doe, too, would have fallen. And tomorrow there would have been more than two hawks circling over that swale.

But there were only two coyotes.

And now Vol was there, Vol, the dog that had lain on the hillside and watched that fawn play hour after hour. These besieged folk down there were friends. Their besiegers were of that clan that had attacked him there on the ledge in the moonlight months ago. They

were of that clan with which sheep dogs have been at war since time immemorial. And Vol—well, for some weeks now Vol had been a sheep dog as surely as were Buck and Juno back in Camp Number Seven. There was no hesitation, then, when he saw what was going on. There was no time for hesitation.

The coyotes, preparing for another sally, heard Vol's running feet only in time to half turn before he was upon them. And that half turn meant, for the nearest coyote, only a fatal impact. Vol's broad shoulder caught him in mid-ribs. The coyote went spinning, as though struck by a thunderbolt. But Vol was on him before he could regain his feet. Vol's white teeth were lashing, slashing, gripping for that spot beneath the coyote's jaws. They snapped shut on matted fur—and flesh. But instead of clutching deeper, dog-fashion, Vol snapped again, this time elsewhere. This time he caught one waving foot, and again his jaws clamped tight.

All this in a matter of seconds, almost before the coyote had ceased rolling from that headlong charge. It ended in a yelp of frightened pain, a yelp that gurgled and faded away. Vol sensed what he had done. He turned away. The other coyote was streaking up the hillside, tail low behind, nose far out in front, running for his life. Prong-horns were forgotten. Long Face was heading for safety, and heading there as fast as his frightened legs could carry him.

But he had started too late. Vol caught up with him at the hilltop, and Vol left him in the next hollow.

That Long-Faced One had run his last race. The attack on the lamb-like fawn was fully avenged.

When Vol went back over the hill to the hollow where the tragedy had been staged, almost completed, he saw the prong-horn family slowly trotting westward, the buck leading the way, the fawn following on three legs and the doe, also limping, bringing up the rear. They were almost out of sight, and as Vol watched they passed from view over a distant ridge, headed toward Willow Creek Valley.

Vol went on down into the swale, found the battered gray thing that had only a little while ago been a snarling, snapping coyote, sniffed at it contemptuously, left his mark that others who might come should know who dealt out justice on these flats, and turned to the story of what had happened as it was written there in the dusty grass. The hoof prints and pad marks were all confused in the dry soil, but Vol's nose led him back down the hollow a way to where the story had begun.

The prong-horns had been feeding here in the hollow. Fifty yards away was such a cut-bank as he had found on that visit to his friends only a few days before. The coyotes had gone to this cut-bank, had hidden there. The fawn had been lured near, how easily Vol well knew. One coyote had leaped out, caught the little creature by one leg. But the doe had been near by. Her hoofs had saved the fawn's life in that first charge. And after that there had been only one thing to do—stand and fight, just as they were fighting when Vol arrived.



There it was written in the grass. The coyotes' trail. The dash they had made. The little splotch of blood, the doe's sharp hoof prints where she had leaped to the rescue. The trail of the family as it was slowly forced back up the swale. More splashes of blood, where the coyotes had ripped the buck's shoulder. And there beyond, on the hillside, that motionless heap of gray fur that mutely told how it had ended.

## 4

WHEN he returned to Willow Creek Valley, Vol descended the bluff well below his den and trotted upstream toward his private waterhole. Dusk was already falling and the shadows were heavy on the valley floor. But as the dog approached the waterhole he saw two brown forms in the tall grass ahead. They wheeled, white rump-patches flashed in the dusk and they vanished. Vol drank his fill and climbed to his ledge.

All night he lay there, half-drowsing yet with one ear cocked toward the valley below. When the late moon came he could make out those two brown forms near the waterhole again, and he knew that near by must be a third, a little creature with a torn leg and a great pain and a huge wonder about coyotes and strange valleys. Once he heard a coyote yapping off there to the east and he roused to watch the opposite rim there against the sky. But no coyote form appeared, and finally even the yapping ceased. The Long-Faced One



had been prowling in that swale on the flats and must have found there the same story of the day's happenings that Vol had traced out some hours before. And no doubt he found the message Vol had left for just such a prowler as he.

When the dog went down to the waterhole at dawn the prong-horns turned and ran again, for they had been close by. But this time they ran neither so fast nor so far, and Vol saw now that the fawn had recovered enough overnight that it could follow the older pair at fair speed even on three legs. Before he had left the waterhole, Vol watched the prong-horns halt only a few hundred yards up the valley, stare at him a time and then resume their grazing. But rather than travel far in search of his morning meal, and thus lose sight of this family he somehow felt were his charges, the dog turned to the tall grass just below the waterhole. He would hunt field mice and ground squirrels.

It is amazing what a big and apparently clumsy dog, such as Vol, can accomplish with practice. When one watches a cat stalking a mouse one realizes that there are arts outside the human realm. But watch a dog at the same business and it is immediately lifted to the finest of fine arts. Eyes, ears, paws and jaws are all called into play in the most exacting sort of hunting, where the slightest miscalculation means a miss and a loss. But by the time Vol had gone two hundred yards down the valley, to the next waterhole, he had caught four field mice and two ground squirrels.

Dawn, when the trace of dew was yet upon the grass, was the time for such hunting as this. When that dew had gone, with the rising sun, the sharp scents would also vanish. But now Vol ranged the grass with wriggling nostrils. He caught a scent, saw the slightest sort of movement. He minced toward it, careful as a cat, skillful as a fox. There, in that little tuft of grass, surely that was where the mouse was hiding. He hesitated, head cocked to one side, ears sharply up. His nose verified the guess. Another wary step forward and into that little grass clump swished a quick paw with a deadly slap. The first such blow was a perfect hit, and quick, nipping teeth followed the paw into the grass, now squirming with a prisoner beneath it. The next time that blow was not so accurate, and there was a scramble as mouse escaped by a hair's breadth and dog scurried after it.

With ground squirrels it was different. One caught them out away from their holes, saw them first, was quicker. A big dog could be quicker than a little ground squirrel. Sometimes he could. Then there would be a race, and if the little striped fellow reached the hole before the dog reached him, he won. But if the dog won, Mr. Stripes was not at home for dinner.

After the morning meal, Vol spent the whole day there on the ledge, watching the valley and the family of prong-horns. Now it was only a matter of time until they would be safe anywhere on those plains—safer, perhaps, than ever, for now they had learned caution

in the best way harsh nature ever devised for teaching. And unless something unexpected happened, those days of waiting for the fawn's wounds to heal could be safely spent here in the valley. Coyotes had learned the lesson of this spot. Wildcats never ventured this far away from the foothills and their trees.

Three days passed, and Vol left the valley only briefly and in search of food. The prong-horns had lost their extreme wariness of him and the fawn was noticeably healing. Then a strange coyote from far away invaded the valley by moonlight, and Vol, hearing him and wasting no time on speculation, chased him far out onto the flats to the west. No other strangers came.

By the end of the week the fawn was using its injured leg, though it still limped and could not yet keep up with the buck even for a short run. All three of them, however, had grown used to the tawny dog that came down from the bluff to drink at the deep water-hole, and while they moved away in caution at his approach they no longer fled in sudden fright at the sight of him or the unexpected sound of his tongue lapping the cool water.

Another week of guardianship and the dog saw that the fawn's limp had almost vanished. Wounds heal quickly in the open, particularly in young creatures. He now left the valley unguarded for hours at a time. Then one afternoon he watched the three of them go skimming up the valley in mock fright, and the fawn

lagged scarcely at all, with only a trace of a limp. No coyote could catch that lamb-like creature now.

That evening as the dog lay on his high ledge, listening to the coming night, he knew that his self-appointed task was ended. He licked at his paws, smooth and well cared for. He yawned and rested his scarred muzzle on outstretched forefeet. He recalled that picture of the fawn, bounding up the valley like a brown and white bird. He might not sleep soundly this night—he always slept with one ear tuned to the prowling world about him—but he sensed somehow that he no longer would have that ear cocked for that plaintive little cry of fright and the thud of hurrying hoofs. The prong-horns were safe, safe as Vol himself. And as the cool wind from the valley curled up over the ledge, with its messages of what was going on below, Vol heard that peaceful call of the doves in the cut-banks. He may have heard it before, these past few weeks, but he had not been aware of its soothing, peaceful notes until this evening.

CHAPTER VIII

FRITZ







## CHAPTER VIII

### FRITZ

#### I

**E**VEN before the prong-horns left Willow Creek Valley for the flats again, the fawn's leg healed, Vol felt a vague, inner longing. And after they had gone the restlessness grew strong within him. He made a night journey down the valley to that cabin nestled beneath the bluff, the place the man had lived who had the traps and the gun. It was Vol's first trip down there since that winter day when he had lost a toe and nearly lost his life while learning that badgers occasionally step into steel traps. But now the cabin was deserted, and the man-smell was faint with age.



A little later Vol traveled westward into the edge of those foothills that lay blue on the evening skyline, and in their rocky hillsides he found rock rabbits and magpies, but neither the odor of man nor of other dogs. He did find there, however, a strange scent that called up old memories and made Vol's restless longing even stronger by the pictures it evoked. It was a cat scent, and for all its wildness there was something about it that savored of Vol's first few months at the Big Camp, still a pup at his mother's side who thrust his young muzzle into trouble and new knowledge almost every hour. He had found a strange, furry creature down beside the horse barn one morning, a creature that puffed up when it saw him and made funny, hissing noises. Puppy Vol had romped up to investigate—and Puppy Vol had learned that this creature had the sharpest claws on earth. His nose had ached and burned for a week. But he had come to know about cats.

There in the foothills he found this same cat odor, though it was more rank, definitely wild. But it had taken him back to the Big Camp, to other dogs, to sheep and men and friends.

When he returned to Willow Creek Valley, Vol paused only two days at his den. Then in the dusk of a moonless night he started east.

Camp Number Seven lay only one long night's steady travel over those flats and rolling hills. But Vol did not travel steadily. He followed trails along the

way. He had to capture his food as he went. The next day he spent for the most part in the shade of a yucca plant, rousing toward evening to find a waterhole, drink, and catch himself a meal. Then he traveled eastward again. A second day he spent on the rolling hills, and the third night he came to country familiar from his days of herding with Buck and Juno.

This country reeked of sheep. And before dawn Vol had found evidence that Buck and Juno were with the herd, as usual. Mid-morning of the third day Vol saw the dust cloud that hovered over a traveling flock at this season. But instead of going directly toward it, Vol, warned by some inner sense and long habit, worked well to one side and approached cautiously from up wind. From nearly two miles away he saw the sheep slowly grazing up a broad valley. He found a place on the high hillside and waited.

It was hard waiting. Within the dog were two conflicting natures. He was collie and sheep dog. The emotions roused by that strain urged him to go directly down and join the dogs he knew must be there. But he was also part wolf. And he had lived many months in the wilds. This strain and this experience urged him to remain where he was and see what happened. Added to this latter urging was the searing memory of Dutch John, those heavy, vicious boots that reeked of rank mutton tallow, the gun Dutch John carried and the slashing claws of Dutch John's pet and companion who

probably was still chained to the wheel of the little house on wheels—Fritz, the badger.

Vol stayed where he was, and waited.

## 2

It was noon before the sheep came within half a mile of him. Then he saw the herder on the hilltop to the right, still further away. With him were three dogs—big, yellow Buck, little black and tan Juno and a rangy, sand-colored stranger.

The sheep began to scatter, half a dozen lambs leading the movement. Vol saw and was tempted to trot down there and send the venturesome ones back into the flock where they belonged. He even stood up. Then he saw the herder on the hilltop wave his arms. He soon heard the herder's voice, angry and loud. It was Dutch John's voice. He saw Buck start toward the straying flock, then hesitate. He saw Juno follow, then turn back, and he heard Dutch John's voice rise in angry curses. Juno stood there, bewildered, but Buck went on down the hillside, watching back over his shoulder. The herder ran at Juno, still shouting, and kicked her. Yes, this was Dutch John, the same Dutch John.

Buck went on down among the sheep, began to herd them back where they belonged. Vol started toward him, skirting the tall grass and the cut-banks that gave him natural protection by making him harder to see

from the opposite hilltop. A hundred yards from the nearest lambs, Buck saw him. The wind was still in Vol's favor. Perhaps, in the light of what happened, it was in his disfavor. Had Buck caught his scent immediately all might have been well.

Buck saw this stranger, and he forgot about the sheep. He barked a challenge. Then he advanced stiff-legged. Vol, tail wagging in friendship, continued down the hillside. They both paused, ten yards apart. Buck's hackles were stiff and he was snarling a challenge. As Vol looked him over it seemed that Buck had dwindled in size since last Vol saw him. Buck was neither so tall nor so heavy as Vol, now. A year ago one warning growl from Buck would have set Vol down into his place. Now Vol walked boldly up to Buck, confident that if old friendship were no longer recognized he would yet have the better of the encounter.

Buck was snarling and side-stepping as Vol came close. Vol's tail was still wagging in friendship. Buck hesitated an instant, sniffed the stranger. His snarl was not quite so belligerent. He sniffed again. Then Vol crowded close, in his eagerness, and bumped Buck with a shoulder. Instantly Buck flared up, stiffened and flew at him. Buck might be outweighed, but he did not even know the meaning of the word fear.

Vol met the attack with a hard shoulder that threw Buck off balance. In another instant Vol had bowled him over. But instead of fastening on Buck's exposed throat, Vol backed away, ears laid back and fangs bared,

but tail still wagging faintly. Buck came cautiously near and nosed him again. This time there was no open hostility. They stood there several moments, growls dying in their throats and some semblance of the old friendship taking form again.

But all this time things were happening up on the hilltop where the herder stood. To Dutch John, the only strange dogs in this part of the country must be enemy dogs, or wolves. He saw Vol and Buck as they approached each other. He saw that Buck was not tending to the sheep as he was told. Dutch John was angry again. He ordered Juno down there. But Juno, still suffering from the kick, ran the other way. Then the herder turned on the third dog, ordered him down there with Buck. That fellow paused, lifted his lip in a snarl, then sullenly obeyed. Dutch John, carrying his rifle, followed.

## 3

THE strange dog had scarcely started toward the sheep when Buck sprang at Vol, down there in the valley. It looked like a fight from the hillside. And before Buck had regained his feet and begun to recognize Vol, the long-legged dog that had sullenly obeyed Dutch John was flying down the slope. He might not care much for sheep herding, but he would never miss a fight.

Vol saw him coming only an instant before he leaped. This stranger was obviously cross-bred, a better fighter than a sheep dog, very much of a type with Dutch

John. He had long legs, broad, powerful jaws but a narrow chest and barrel. He came now at top speed. Vol only half-turned to face the charge, but that movement made the blow of Sandy's shoulder glance off instead of striking him full on. Vol sprawled, but did not leave his feet. He was facing the stranger when he turned, and without further preliminaries Vol drove in.

This sand-colored stranger was as big as Vol. Every motion showed that he was aching for battle. Buck's attitude toward him spoke volumes, had Vol seen it. Buck had felt Sandy's teeth. But Sandy was soft, compared to Vol. And Sandy's fighting had been among those of his own kind. Vol had fought with the wild ones. Thence came his strategy. Thence came his quick attack. He caught Sandy unprepared, and Sandy went down. Vol was on him in a flash. But still he was in no mood for such fighting as Sandy seemed to want. Vol roughed him up, nipped him, made a motion of throttling him, then backed away.

Sandy scrambled to his feet, bristling. He had been insulted and, unlike Buck, he was not ready to accept the outcome of this first test of strength. He flew in, figuratively asking for more. And the two of them, Vol and Sandy, went down together, rolling, snarling, now fighting in earnest.

By that time Dutch John was less than fifty yards away. He halted, shouting, and lifted his rifle. He was not sure whether this were strange dog or wolf that his own dogs had tackled, but he had no doubts about his



part in the goings-on. However, he did not stop to think that his Sandy dog and this stranger were almost of a size, and not so very different in color. He knew his own dog was a vicious fighter. He expected Sandy to be getting the best of it. So when the two snarling, snapping dogs halted in their rolling about and one struggled to his feet, with a firm grip on the other's throat, Dutch John drew a quick bead on the under dog and fired.

The thunder of the gunshot, echoing through the valley, was the first hint Vol had that Dutch John was near by. With that roar he heard the thud of a bullet close beneath him, felt the quiver in Sandy's body. And without even a look behind, Vol sped away down the valley. As before, when another man with a gun had fired on him from close by, Vol ran like a kit-fox, zig-zag.

But that was needless, though instinctive, caution. Dutch John stood there quite bewildered. He had shot a dog, and that dog lay there on the ground. This other dog, dashing head-on into the flock—was it Sandy, or the other dog, or a wolf? The herder didn't know. And before he could decide what to do, Vol was hopelessly out of range in the midst of a scattering flock. Panic-stricken, the sheep fled before him, then closed in behind him. He ran through the whole flock, and on down the valley. And not one shot followed him.

Beyond the flock and fully a mile away from the scene of the fight so suddenly ended, Vol slowed up



and looked back. The sheep were scattered far up both hillsides and one little bunch was following Vol down the valley in blind confusion.

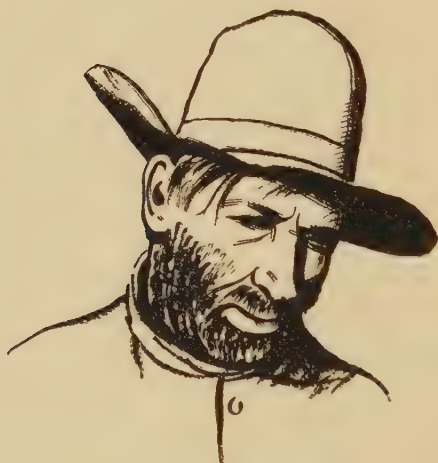
Vol climbed the slope a little way and turned to watch for a moment. Dutch John was running about, shouting oaths that carried all the way to Vol's ears, waving his arms and doing his best to gather his sheep once more. Juno was working with a will, but Buck stood there on the hillside and refused to budge. Now and then the herder would turn to shout at him, and once he ran toward him, but the sheep were so badly scattered that John couldn't take time from the job of getting them together to do as he evidently wanted with Buck.

Vol watched for several minutes, then turned away and loped on down the valley. He had no object in going that direction. He merely was getting away from Dutch John and all that the herder seemed always to mean—confusion, fear, anger and cruelty. But it happened that Vol was heading directly toward Camp Number Seven. Half an hour later he topped a rise and looked down on the familiar windmill, the long, low tanks, the pens on the hillside and the house on wheels near by.

The light wind was slowly turning the windmill wheel and a jerkily spurting stream of water flowed into the troughs, gleaming in the sunlight. Vol was thirsty. The water bade him go on down and drink. But he was wary. Every experience he had had with

men and their way of doing things, this past year, had turned out badly. And Camp Number Seven, for all its memories, was a man's camp. There were sheep there of a night, and dogs, and Vol had been there many long days. Herder Louie had been there, too. And Herder Louie had been a friend. But Camp Number Seven was also the place where Dutch John lived.

4



VOL watched the place for several minutes. Then, instead of going directly down to the troughs with their cool, sweet water, he skirted the hillside, dodged over the brink and approached the camp from the other side. There he watched again for some time. Still no sign of man or the unpleasantness that seemed to go with

man-creatures. Vol was still suspicious. He knew Dutch John was not there, but maybe there would be another, a friend, perhaps, of Dutch John. And again he turned away.

He came in sight of the camp from still a third angle, and again he saw nothing to justify his suspicions. This time he went slowly down the hillside, every sense alert. He reached the far corner of the pens, sniffed it and found signs of no one but Buck, Juno and that Sandy dog. This reassured him somewhat. He trotted down to the water tanks and drank.

When he had his fill of the cool water Vol became conscious of a familiar, unfriendly odor. He nosed the air. It came from up the hillside, toward the little house. Vol started toward it, still uncertain what it was. As he approached the house he became aware of still another odor, and this scent brought up the hackles along his back. No doubt about this second odor. It was badger. Fritz!

Then Vol saw him. He stopped, puzzled. The badger he remembered was big, broad, terrible. The animal that lay there beneath the house was small, smaller even than the badger Vol had seen in the trap out on the flats that evening he himself had learned to respect those vicious steel jaws. The picture his memory called up told him that Fritz, the badger, was a veritable giant. But then, Vol also remembered Buck as a dog considerably bigger than himself. He dismissed the whole puzzle and went on up to the house.

Now he knew whence that first unpleasant odor came. A pair of high, black boots stood on the top step, reeking of rancid mutton fat. The same kind of boots that Dutch John always wore. The same kind of boots that Dutch John had kicked Vol with. Vol had hated those boots and that odor ever since the first day he smelled them. He hated them now with a new fury. He hurried toward them.

There was a snarl and a grunting hiss. A yellowish brown beast lunged toward the dog from the shadows beneath the house. Vol leaped aside, spun around to face this surprise. Here was Fritz, back again to plague him. Momentarily Vol had forgotten the badger in his anger at those boots. Now there was no question what he should do.

He leaped in, feinted, dodged, caught the badger by the shoulders and spun the creature over onto its back. He was clear out of reach of the vicious claws in another leap. Then he was in again, ripping and slashing. Then out.

What had happened to this badger? Once Vol had been nothing like a match for him. Now Vol seemed to strike at will, and in the first few sallies he received only two slight scratches. There was now no doubt about where the advantage lay. Vol was almost contemptuous of the scar-faced creature hissing there in front of him. He closed in again, this time reckless in his confidence. And this time he felt the full force of Fritz's claws, raking down his jowl.

That blow settled the badger's fate. Vol tore in then without restraint. Over went the badger onto his back. Then gory gashes appeared along his belly. And at last Vol's teeth were clutching at the throat beneath Fritz's bristly hair and just below that broad leather collar that he still wore. Two minutes and it was all over.

Vol shook and bruised the battered creature some time before he was satisfied. Then he backed away, sneezing at the pain in his jowl. And as he stood there he caught that rank tallow odor again. He had been on his way to those boots when Fritz had leaped out at him. Now he sprang at them, caught one and flung it far over his shoulder, sank his teeth into the other. Half a dozen eager slashes and that boot was left in tatters. He went to where its mate lay among the cactus, and when he left that one there was only a heavy sole and a scattering of dark leather pieces, none of them as large as a man's palm.

Vol stood a full minute regarding his handiwork. Then he turned contemptuously away, left his sign on one wheel of the house and trotted back to the water tanks. Now his tail was carried high and his eyes were narrowed in confident challenge to the whole world. He drank deeply, then he circled the pens and trotted up the hillside. The sun was slipping well toward the west. Vol was hungry. And before long Dutch John would be coming back here with the flock—if he had yet gathered all the scattered ones.

Vol ranged the far hills until dusk before he had run

off enough of the water he had drunk so that he could chase a jack rabbit with any degree of success. Then he ate his fill and felt better than in months. This had been a day of many happenings, and though several of them had been of the sort that had made him distrust all men, the others had given him supreme confidence in his legs, his teeth, his senses and his wisdom born of the wild. Several old scores had been paid off. Vol had come back to this place lured by some inner longing for sheep and lambs. He had found only the same troubles that had driven him away many months before. But now he had found a new dog within his own self. He had come back a dog, a son of his mother. Now he was a wolf again, son of his cross-bred father.

And so, as the dusk deepened and night came, he turned back toward the west. And when his way carried him close to Camp Number Seven, where the blat of penned sheep resounded on the night air, he mounted the hill behind the cabin and stood there watching before he went on. The wind carried his scent down toward the camp, and soon Buck and Juno were barking. Vol stood there, still watching. The dogs down below barked even more noisily. Dutch John appeared in the doorway of his cabin, framed in the yellow light of the oil lamp inside. He shouted at the dogs, his voice even more angry than usual. He bellowed for them to be quiet. But a moment later they were at it again. Vol was still there on the hilltop. And at last John came out into the night with a frying pan in his hand, curs-



ing and calling down the wrath of all the gods upon the dogs.

Then Vol lifted his muzzle, there on the hilltop less than a quarter of a mile away, and howled the wolf cry at the stars. Twice he howled, and both Buck and Juno waited in silence. John stood there with frying pan uplifted in eloquent anger. He was still standing there when Vol turned away, skirted the hilltop and loped off into the west, back again toward Willow Creek Valley.





CHAPTER IX  
THE CABIN







## CHAPTER IX

### THE CABIN

#### I

AFTER that day which ended with Vol howling his derision and challenge down the hillside toward Camp Number Seven, he stayed away from Willow Creek Valley for many nights. Nor did he return to Camp Number Seven. He roamed the hills and flats like a lost soul, and he was forever at odds with the world. He ranged wolf-like from valley to valley, but he seldom hunted in his old manner. Now when he ran jack rabbits it was with yellow-eyed fury. And at night he listened almost hopefully for the yammering of coyotes. When he heard that sound he was off at once, silent as a moon-shadow, swift as a diving bull-bat. Night after night he swooped down among gatherings of those little prairie wolves and sent them yelping toward the horizon, more often than not with blood in

their tracks. Finally Vol's unreasoning madness toward everything beneath the sky drove him to attack an inoffensive skunk out gathering its evening meal. Vol killed again, but after that he went directly to his den in Willow Creek Valley. There he spent a week, alternately soaking his fetid self in the mud of the water-hole and basking in the hot, cleansing sunlight.

That week dulled the hatred that lay within him like a raw wound. But it did not deaden it or wipe it out. Nor did it still the restlessness that coursed his veins with his very blood. Soon he was off again, this time across those flats to the west and away toward the blue foothills that lay there against the horizon.

The first few days in that country of rocky canyons and juniper-clad hills were so calm that the dog's inner self began to feel at peace with the world once more. Here were rock rabbits, not so easy to catch as the cottontails Vol knew so well, but good food and not beyond the dog's hunting powers. Here were magpies that flew with startling swiftness despite their awkward motions. Here were chipmunks that whistled jeeringly, yet with a friendly note, from the rocks. Here was a sense of peace.

Then, one afternoon, that whole sense of peace was shattered with one gust of wind. Vol caught that cat-scent he had found but had been unable to trace on his previous trip to these hills. Now it was strong, fresh. It brought back a confusion of memories—puppy days at the Big Ranch, Herder Louie, pleasant hours and days.

And with those memories came the thought of Dutch John, cruel, brutal, vengeful. Out of this confusion of memories rose the Vol of only a few days ago. His hackles lifted. His eyes narrowed and glowed yellow, wolf-like again. He was the killer, the mad wanderer once more.

For hours he trailed that cat-scent. Several times he knew he was closing in on its maker, but each time it led on over another rise or through another valley. Toward dawn it led to a tall, lightning-blasted pine, and there it ended. But the next evening Vol found it once more, and again he followed.

This night the trail led from a rocky hillside down a steep valley. On the next hilltop Vol found the remains of a rock rabbit, half-eaten, and now the scent was even stronger. As he entered the next hollow beyond he knew he was close on the quarry's trail.

Then he crossed an even fresher scent, that of a rock rabbit. He wavered momentarily, then turned aside. The rabbit scent meant meat. He followed it. It led through the junipers perhaps a hundred yards, then into a cluster of rocks. Vol was wary now. He knew he was close to his game. The cat-scent still hung in the air but he paid it no heed. The rabbit scent told him the little, brown fellow was there behind the bunch of grass just beneath a red boulder. Vol's muscles tautened. He leaped.

As he came up with meat between his jaws he heard a spitting hiss. It was almost directly above him. He

looked up. On the boulder there above him crouched a tawny creature with a broad face, glinting eyes and gleaming white teeth. There crouched the beast with the cat odor!

Vol paused only an instant. Then he leaped back. But the instant's hesitation was too long. Down from the rock catapulted Claws, the wild cat. He did not land squarely, but his long, needle-like claws fastened on Vol's shoulders with stabbing pain. One swift paw raked downward, tore at Vol's throat. But the dog jerked aside. The cat half lost its balance and the clawed swipe raked from his ear down along his shoulder.

Another quick sideward leap and Vol had the cat slipping downward. Vol reached back, snapped viciously, missed, snapped again and found bone and sinew. There was a screech and a wild raking of claws. But Vol, with the cat's leg between his jaws, half rolled forward, dislodged the creature and was again on four feet, free of the spitting, snarling, poison-clawed little lynx.

Vol stood now just about where he had been when he leaped at the rabbit. And there in front of the rock was the wild cat, crouched almost directly over Vol's meat. Even had the dog been willing to call off the fight with Claws, he could not abandon his meal in that fashion with either grace or dignity. Vol closed in again.

This time Claws rose on his hind legs in a half-spring to meet the charge. But only one forepaw was



of any use. Vol was a veteran at close combat. He took a raking blow along one side of his head in return for a quick snap at Claws' throat. That snap would have finished a coyote. But Claws was too quick. He swerved.

The blow, however, sent the wild cat snarling back against the rock, and as Vol followed he caught at a shoulder, then a tawny back. He caught the back, just behind the shoulders. He lifted his head, shook the cat as he would have shaken a rat. Claws' splayed feet raked the air and his white teeth snapped in vain. Then Vol flung him to one side, and Claws went rolling down the rocky slope.

The wild cat wheezed and grunted as he struck the ground. He did not get to his feet at once. Breathless, he lay where he fell, at the foot of a scrub oak clump. And Vol did not follow him. Vol only glanced in his direction, then nosed the rabbit that had caused all this trouble. He had begun to eat before he heard sounds of motion from where the wild cat lay. Then he looked up and growled. But Claws went on down the hillside unmolested.

Vol finished his meal. Then, uneasily, he cleansed his wounds. They were painful but not serious. Not nearly so serious as something else that had happened—something inside. Vol had not killed the wild cat. He had not wanted to kill it.

## 2

LATE that night Vol topped a ridge and looked down on a patch of jack-pine where dozens of fresh stumps gleamed white in the starlight. He paused there several minutes and watched, motionless. Nothing appeared to rouse his suspicions, but instead of going straight down to investigate he circled far to one side and approached the jack-pine grove from the north. And again he watched without seeing anything but the white stumps among the dark trees. At last he went cautiously down among them.

He found man-scent.

Vol froze in his tracks at that odor. Every time he had met that scent in many months he had found trouble with it. He was wary, and every nerve was taut as a fiddle-string.

Backing several steps away, he turned and retraced his own tracks to the hilltop. From there he traveled north along the ridge, away from the stumps. But in less than half a mile the man-scent came to him again, once more from the hillside below. This time it was stronger. It came from a cabin, built of logs and set at the edge of a hollow where tall grass was now ripening into hay. Beyond the house was a log barn, and beside the barn stood two haystacks. In the barn, Vol's nose told him, were two horses and a cow.

But nowhere around the place was dog-scent. Nor,

on the other hand, was there the scent of coyote and badger and skunk such as had marked the trapper's cabin beneath the bluff in Willow Creek Valley. And the man-scent here was the same as Vol had found among the jack-pine stumps.

Vol had remained wary throughout his examination of the place. Not in months had he known man's habitation that was not, somehow, painful and even dangerous for him. But perhaps it was his encounter with the wild cat, and the memories of the Big Camp which the cat had recalled, that made him more than casually interested in this place. In any case, he went over it thoroughly. Then he followed a trail that led back up the ridge toward the jack-pine stumps.

Among the trees again, Vol went from stump to stump, sniffing each one. Nowhere did he find anything to frighten him. There was no steel-trap smell, no odor of rancid mutton tallow, nothing but man and horse odors where trees had been felled and hauled away as logs.

But at last his caution dictated his actions. He went up onto the ridge again, saw that dawn was threatening in the east and sought out a resting place in a brush clump on the ridge-top half a mile away. There he slept.

The sun rode high when Vol awakened to the muffled sound of an ax, echoing up and along the ridge. He roused, stretched, attended to his wounds—they

were stiff, now, and had begun to draw—and ventured forth, shadow-like, among the rocks.

He crept back along the ridge until he could see the jack-pines. There a man stood wielding an ax with its steady rhythm, unhurried but effective. White chips fell and the ax bit deeper toward the tree's center. Vol paused and lay down to watch. The man moved around to the other side, began again in a new place and once more the chips flew.

In a little opening not far away a team of horses grazed, fully harnessed, and near by a boy of perhaps twelve sat on a log, watching them and whittling. Vol had eyed the boy several minutes when he heard the man shout. There was a warning sound of cracking wood, then a swishing in the tree tops. Then came a crash, resounding over the whole hillside. The tree came down.

The boy ceased his whittling, picked up an ax and joined the man. Together, they began lopping off the branches of the fallen tree. When it had been stripped to a long, straight stem the boy brought the horses. A chain was fastened around one end of the new-cut log, the team was hitched on and down the hillside they went, man, boy, team and log, off toward the cabin.

When they were out of sight, Vol went down where they had been working. He sniffed the axes they had left behind. He sniffed the coat the boy had left hanging on a bush. He nosed at the shavings the boy had made with his whittling. And as he went from one place

to another, his old nervousness was gone. He was not afraid of these people and their way of doing things. Something in their very scent bred confidence in him.

Then he followed the trail they had taken back toward the house. At the edge of the hollow where the cabin stood he waited and watched. They were loosening the chain, hauling it from under the end of the log, which had been taken to the pile of other jack-pine logs near the barn. That done, they put the horses in the barn and went into the cabin, where Vol's nose soon told him they were cooking the noon meal.

All afternoon he lay there on the ridge watching them fell and trim the jack-pines. And that evening he hovered in the brush at the edge of the hollow, watching the cabin. Several times he was tempted to go down there and curl up beside the doorstep. But each time his old instincts warned him and he turned back. Finally he turned resolutely away and trotted up over the ridge. Back he went into the wild country where there were no men, but only rock rabbits and coyotes and wild cats.

## 3

ALL that night and the next day Vol remained back in the hills. But wherever he went, there persisted in his brain the memory of a man felling a tree and a boy helping haul it down the hillside. So on the second afternoon he turned back toward the ridge where the jack-pine thicket grew.

As he approached it there was no sound of a busy axman. The place was deserted. For half an hour he watched and waited, but neither man nor boy came. Then he went down among the stumps. There were no axes left lying where they had been dropped. The boy's coat was gone. There were no new whittlings.

So Vol followed the trail toward the cabin.

When he got within sight of the place, he saw work of a new sort going on. The man was notching the logs, the boy smoothing those already notched. The foundation logs had already been put in place for an addition to the cabin. Late in the afternoon they hauled and pried another tier on top of the foundation and the form of the new structure was definitely marked. More days' work, much of it with the team hauling the logs into place, lay ahead if the new room was to be finished before summer turned to fall and the snow blew in on November winds.

All afternoon Vol lay and watched, and again the urge to go down and join these two people was strong within him. But he still could not overcome the memories of many months, memories of other men and what they had done. If this man and his boy were not the sort to shoot at him or set a trap for him, why did they not already have a dog? And yet, there was no sign Vol could find that they were unfriendly. It was a puzzle, and his memories and his wolf blood kept him there out of sight.

At sundown they halted work and the man went in-



side the cabin. Smoke pouring from the chimney showed that he was starting a fire to cook the evening meal. The boy went down the hillside toward the meadow where the horses were grazing, caught one, mounted it and started back, driving the other ahead of him. Again the urge to go down and join these two people was strong within Vol. He could go down there now, into the open, and trot out and meet the boy on the horse. If the boy greeted him and made him welcome, all would be settled. If not, Vol could turn and run, as he had run before when his advances had turned out wrong. It would be easier, perhaps safer, with the man out of sight. Men seemed always to be enemies—men, that is, whom Vol had known since Louie passed out of his life.

He would have gone then, perhaps, and made his choice and given the boy the chance to make his, had it not been for one thing. The man, just then, came out of the cabin with a bucket of ashes, walked down the path and dumped them. And instead of going back inside he stood there, while the fine ashes rose in a cloud and blew away, waiting for the boy to water the horses at the little stream and bring them up the hillside toward the barn.

The opportunity had come and passed. Vol could not go down now. Instead he turned away in the shadows, headed back up the ridge and was gone.



## 4

TOWARD midnight Vol returned. Why he came back, he neither knew or wondered. Deep inside was that sense of kinship with human beings that welled up from his mother's blood. Dogs such as he and his mother had been companions of man since the days when men deserted their caves. Dogs such as he and his mother had lived with man since time long forgotten, guarding man's home, man's sheep, man's children. That, had Vol known such things, explained it all. But Vol did not know. He only felt an inner longing that called him back, time after time.

As he topped the ridge now there was a strong wind blowing, and as he nosed it he caught a strange scent. It was, in a way, a familiar scent, stinging, pungent. It was the same scent that came from men's houses, the scent that used to come from the little black pipe on top of the house on wheels when Louie was cooking supper. But this was more acrid. It was not wood smoke.

Vol went down the hillside. No smoke came from the chimney on the cabin. There was not even a light inside. But as he trotted into the open, he saw something moving in the grass down near the stream. It was gray, and it billowed like a cloud. Beneath it was a dancing fringe of red. And it flared there where the man had emptied that bucket of ashes.

Vol watched it several minutes. Beneath that cloud

flared moon-color. It was as though the moon itself were rising and glinting there in the grass. As he watched, it grew. It was high, then low, then high again. And it had many tongues, all red. It danced like the air over distant hilltops on hot summer days. And it crept forward.

The first cloud of smoke had risen now and a glow of flames was taking its place. The wall of dancing red advanced up the path toward the house—not up the path itself, but along both sides.

Vol stood at the corner of the house and watched. The flames were beginning to roar, like a wind in the trees.

A flash of memory came back suddenly. Vol had seen Dutch John scatter ashes one night. Among them had been little red stones that glowed. The wind had come and blown them along the ground, and they had taken hold of the grass, eaten it, grown into flames like these. Buck and Juno and Vol had dashed at those flames and barked. They had tried to play with the dancing creature, and it had stung their noses and choked them and hurt their eyes. Dutch John had come. He had cursed the dogs and he had stamped about with his vile-smelling boots and the red flames had disappeared. But where they had been there was no grass. The red flames had eaten that grass. And they had bitten Vol's nose and his feet.

This was the same thing. It would bite. It would eat

the grass. It might eat the cabin. But a man could stamp on it, and it would vanish.

Vol began to bark. Only once before in many months had he barked, and the echo of that cry had frightened him. Now he was not frightened. He barked again and again. And when his voice did not bring the man hurrying from the cabin, he went to the door and barked. He even scratched on the door.

Sounds came from inside. Vol barked louder than ever. The door opened. Vol saw the man stand there a moment, heard him shout, "Fire!" And a few moments later man and boy were outside. There were quick orders, shouted above Vol's barking. The boy ran to the barn, came back with empty grain sacks. The man, armed with a broom, began beating at the flames.

Now, Vol knew, the flames would die. Dutch John had killed them with a few stamps of his foot. This time there were two of them to stamp out the flames—three, counting Vol, though he did little but run about and bark.

But it was not as easy as Vol might have thought. This was a grass fire well under way. The wind was strong. There was much dry grass to feed it. For half an hour the man and the boy fought, with swinging sacks which they had soaked at the stream. Several times they seemed to have the flames under control, only to lose out when some new arm of fire burst into life at an unexpected point. All the while, Vol was at their heels, barking, snarling at the red flames, dash-

ing at them, threatening them. But they paid him not the slightest attention.

"Watch that point making for the haystacks, son!"

"Got it, Dad!"

"Let me have your sack, son. It's wetter than mine."

"Coming, Dad!"

And still they battled, the flames, the man, the boy and the dog. The smoke filled the air and the glow of the fire made the whole hollow bright. Once a tongue of fire reached toward the cabin itself while man and boy were busy far at one side. Vol saw it, ran toward it barking. Both came and checked it, and Vol got his first word of attention.

"Good dog!"

This from the man, while the boy stood and puffed.

For another hour they fought, back and forth, keeping the flames back at each new advance. Then, with the dawn streaking the east, the flames died down to smoldering embers. The whole valley, clear to the creek, lay black and smoking. But the cabin was untouched, the barn had been saved and the haystacks still stood intact. The man went up and down the black line, beating out persistent embers, and the boy trotted to the stream to soak the sacks for a last time. One more round of the smoldering grass and it was over. The flames had been whipped.

"Good work," said the man, straightening up and smiling through the smoke and ashes that coated his face. "I'm tired, son, dog-tired. How about you?"

"So'm I."

"Let's wash up and eat, then get some rest." He looked approvingly at Vol. "What do *you* say?"

No urging was needed. The boy led the way. Vol followed. The man brought up the rear. And all three of them went into the cabin.

## 5

VOL lay inside the cabin, close beside a chair that was drawn up to a table. The fragrance of the morning meal filled the room, pleasing Vol's sensitive nostrils although his belly was well filled. Before Dad had even started breakfast he had set a big bowl of food out for this strange dog that had come out of the night to save their home. Sunlight, flooding through the open door, fell full on Vol and warmed him pleasantly. Overhead, on the table, dishes clinked and the voices of father and son came to the dog's ears like pleasant music.

Across the table, beside another chair, Vol saw two big feet, in laced boots. Above those boots were corduroy trousers. They were not the sort of feet that would thud angrily into a dog's ribs. That Vol knew almost instinctively. And there close beside Vol's head were other feet, these smaller and clad in shoes instead of boots. Above them were the legs of faded blue overalls. Vol once had seen a boy at the Big Camp, and he, too, had worn faded blue overalls. That boy had played

with him, laughed, romped, rubbed his puppy fur. Almost as the memory came to him now a small, brown hand reached down to rub his head, scratch the itchy places behind his ears and then gently touch the patch on his muzzle where an angry tongue of flame had seared off the hair.

Vol reached out and sniffed at the overalls. They smelled clean, friendly. He touched the shoes with his tongue. They, too, were friendly, if a tongue can tell such a thing. They had the same indefinable sense of safety, friendship and welcome that filled the cabin. Vol knew now that he should have come down to this cabin the first day he saw it.

The talk had paused and for some time there had been only the sounds of eating. Now Dad spoke again, in a deep, clear voice. Vol liked that voice. It lacked the soft, flowing rhythms of Louie's vanished voice, but neither did it have the cruel harshness of Dutch John's words. It was open, honest, friendly, like everything else in the cabin.

"I reckon there must have been some live coals in those ashes," Dad was saying. "I just dumped them, without looking, I guess."

"But isn't that where we always dump them?" Son asked. His voice, too, was a friendly sound, in cadences much like that of his father. At the sound, Vol's tail began thumping the floor.

"Yep, but the wind was strong. It probably blew some of them over into the grass, and they started a



fire that smoldered for hours before it really got going."

"Well, I guess it won't happen again. There isn't much grass left down there any more."

"Sure isn't. . . . What's that thumping?" Dad's face appeared around the edge of the table. Then he laughed, and Vol beat the floor with his tail harder than ever. "My gosh! That dog! . . . Say, old fellow, where'd you come from?"

Vol stood up at the invitation in the words.

"Where'd you come from, I asked," Dad repeated. But Vol could only wag his tail and look pleased. So Dad held out a strip of bacon and the dog took it, politely rather than eagerly. He was not hungry. But at the approving pat on the head which he received he licked the big hand, then returned to sit beside the boy's chair.

"I guess he likes me," the boy said with a laugh of pleased surprise.

"Sure seems to. Well, old fellow," and now the man was looking Vol in the eyes and speaking very seriously, "if you hadn't come when you did, we wouldn't any of us be here now. I don't know where you came from or how long you're going to stay, but you've earned a home for life, if you want it."

As if in answer, Vol thrust his scorched muzzle into the boy's hand and licked his brown fingers.















